

The New Criterion

February 1997

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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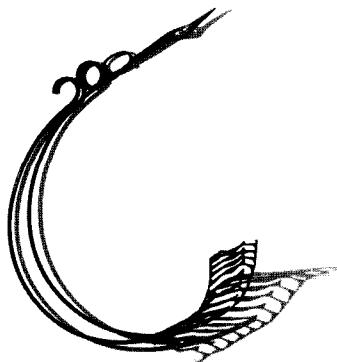
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The New Criterion February 1997

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ROBERT P. GEORGE,
DEPT. OF POLITICS,
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

Notes & Comments:

February 1997

Academic whorehouses

Last year in this space, we reported that Georgetown University, capitulating to the meretricious forces of multiculturalism and political correctness, had decided to scrap the requirement that students majoring in English read Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Milton (see “Georgetown Flunks English,” *The New Criterion*, January 1996). Instead of immersing themselves in the masterworks of English literature, English majors could henceforth devote themselves to such topics as “Studies in Culture and Performance,” an area of study that—in the words of a document put out by Georgetown’s English department—focuses on “the power exerted on our lives by such cultural and performative categories as race, gender, sexuality, and nationality.” In other words, it was goodbye to Shakespeare, and hello to multicultural claptrap.

We noted in the course of our report that the situation at Georgetown, far from being unusual, represented business as usual in contemporary American higher education. All across the country, traditional academic standards are under siege. The jettisoning of major authors in favor a race-gender-class goulash is one aspect of this siege, and anyone who cares to look will find evidence of it at every turn.

But this is not, of course, what the academic establishment would have you believe. Even as the teaching of the humanities is being gutted from within by increasingly rabid ideologues, spokesmen for the academic establishment are busy bleating that there is no cause for alarm, that criticism of the academy is overstated, that the hue and cry over the politicization of the humanities is a fantasy concocted by “right-wing” extremists.

Indeed, such efforts at damage control have become a routine feature on the academic landscape. The worse things get, the more vociferously academic claquees broadcast the soothing message to the public—to parents, alumni, and trustees—that things have never been better or more salubrious within the expensively cloistered groves of academe. A typical example of such efforts at damage control was “What’s Being Taught in Survey Courses?,” a national poll published by the Modern Language Association a couple of years ago. As was noted in these pages at the time (see “A Farewell to the MLA,” *The New Criterion*, February 1995), this survey of English departments was essentially a public-relations blind. Dispensing the cheery news that Chaucer was taught in 89 percent of undergraduate survey courses, Shakespeare in 77.7 percent, and so on, the survey was intended to be “reassuring to parents of college-age students” be-

cause it showed that “traditional authors continue to be the mainstay” of English survey courses.

What this poll did not discuss, of course, was the extent to which such standard authors are in fact being squeezed out of the curriculum at prestigious institutions like Georgetown or—in some ways even more alarming—the extent to which, even when taught, they are made to serve the radical PC agenda: you know, Milton the misogynist, Shakespeare the spokesman for white imperialism, etc.

The true gravity of the situation was brought into sharp focus recently by the National Alumni Forum in a report titled “The Shakespeare File: What English Majors Are Really Studying.” Sparked by Georgetown’s decision to eviscerate its requirements for English majors, the NAF conducted an inquiry into what was in fact being taught in the country’s top college English departments. The results of that inquiry were aptly summed up by the headline of an article that William H. Honan wrote about the study for *The New York Times*: “At Colleges, Sun Is Setting on Shakespeare.” As Mr. Honan notes, the NAF’s new survey shows that

required courses on the great writers are falling by the wayside. In their place, courses proliferate on popular culture topics, like “The Gangster Film” (Georgetown), “Melodrama and Soap Opera” (Duke University) and “20th-Century American Boxing Fiction and Film” (Dartmouth College).

And how is the academy responding to this report? Predictably, with a combination of diversion, derision, and denial. Quoth William W. Cook, chairman of the English department at Dartmouth College: “We mustn’t deify Shakespeare.” Well, OK, but how about simply making sure that college students read Shakespeare?

As the NAF’s report makes clear, things are even worse than Mr. Honan’s summary suggests. Of the seventy colleges surveyed, only twenty-three require English majors to take a course in Shakespeare. And this result, the report notes,

was reached using a very generous definition of a Shakespeare requirement: Colleges requiring students to read at least two of three authors—one of which is Shakespeare—are classified as requiring Shakespeare, whether or not the student in fact reads the Bard.

At Dartmouth, for example, English majors “must choose one course dealing with a single author” and “may choose from among Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer, Ben Jonson, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston,” et al. As Jonathan Yardley noted in an astute column on the NAF report in *The Washington Post*, “the sheer vulgarity” of this requirement beggars belief: “Shakespeare and Toni Morrison as equals!” But such vulgarity, Mr. Yardley goes on to observe,

is everywhere in the English departments, which no longer require students to study works of literature chosen by scholars for their quality, importance and universality. Instead they let students pick and choose in an academic supermarket where “popular culture” as well as the Holy Trinity of “race, gender and class” are the dominant elements.

And the closer one looks, the more dismal things get. Mr. Yardley is quite right that “reading through the lists of courses now offered by these academic whorehouses, one searches long and hard to find evidence of literary knowledge, taste or intellectual rigor.” On the contrary, what one finds are courses dominated by arcane literary “theory,” radical politics, and anemic sexual grandstanding. Thus Amherst features courses in the “Literature of Sexuality” (i.e., such tasty morsels as “Queer Fictions: Texts from the Turn of the Century”) while Georgetown’s “Detective Fiction as Social

Critique” enlightens students about how detective novels “critique and offer alternatives to the nuclear family, traditional masculine values, and capitalist ideology.”

Defenders of this poisonous academic orthodoxy never tire of telling us that everything is just dandy in American higher education. The latest piece of public-relations pabulum from the academic establishment is *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture and History*, by Lawrence Levine, winner of a MacArthur “genius” fellowship and a professor of history at George Mason University and the University of California at Berkeley. This book, which was intended to be the academy’s answer to Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* and other books critical of contemporary academic life, insists *ad nauseam* that critics of the academy have provided “no documentation” for their accusations. The truth is that there now exists a small library of hair-raising documentation about the decline and perversion of academic standards. “The Shakespeare File” is an important addition to this melancholy reading list. It can be had from the National Alumni Forum, 1625 K Street, N.W., Suite 310, Washington, D.C. 20006. Telephone: (202) 467-6787.

Annals of liberal prejudice

If *The New York Times* did its duty by the National Alumni Forum, the same cannot be said about its treatment of *The Dartmouth Review*. On January 4, the *Times* ran an extraordinary puff piece about the president of Dartmouth College, James O.

Freedman. Written by Sara Rimer, “A Shy Scholar Transforms Dartmouth into a Haven for Intellectuals” is a congeries of half-truths, misstatements, and outright falsehoods. The villain of the piece—as of every piece written about Dartmouth in the liberal press these days—is *The Dartmouth Review*, the conservative student-run newspaper that gained national celebrity for its courageously anti-PC crusades in the 1980s. According to Ms. Rimer, one of President Freedman’s many accomplishments was saving Dartmouth from *The Dartmouth Review*: “he restored tolerance and civility by standing up to a group of right-wing students . . . whose harassment of blacks, homosexuals, women and Jews had deeply wounded many on campus.”

In the course of her jeremiad, Ms. Rimer manages the extraordinary journalistic feat of writing whole paragraphs in which virtually every statement of fact is wrong. She claims that William F. Buckley, Jr., was on the paper’s advisory board—this, we suppose, was intended to be guilt by association—but in fact Mr. Buckley has never served on the advisory board of the *Review*, something she could have ascertained simply by taking a look at its masthead. The newspaper that was supposedly harassing blacks had a black editor-in-chief. It had also had three female editors, two editors from the Indian subcontinent, and three Jewish editors. She claims that the *Review* “published a confidential roster of a gay students group,” but this, too, is false. In short, her entire article, which was meant to portray James Freedman as a noble crusader against the forces of prejudice, is itself a specimen example of liberal prejudice blinded by ideology.

Possessing the golden key

by John Herington

Prelude: decline & fall

Students of the ancient classics have this in common with fishermen: they are often to be overheard lamenting the much bigger one that got away—the loss, long ago, of entire literary genres, or of once-famous masterpieces like Aeschylus's tragic trilogy on Achilles and Patroklos, or Ennius's thunderous epic on the history of Rome. More than the students of most other subjects, they are forced to be constantly aware of the appalling fragility of culture. There are reminders at every turn, even if one is only faced with a mutilated sentence in a poem or with a gap in a temple frieze, of how much was lost and the way it was lost, whether through indifference or ignorance or deliberate malice. Hence it seems reasonable, before speculating on the future of the classical component in the European past, to consider whether any hints can be found in a great classical student's vision of the cultural collapse of the classical world. Here is a passage from Wilamowitz, the consummator of the grand tradition of German classical scholarship, on the Roman empire at the apparent height of its material prosperity and power in the second century of our era:

How does it help that this period brims over with General Education, from which no mountain glen in Lycia, no African country

town can be secure—that the Imperial post runs from Lisbon to Palmyra—that roads are paved and aqueducts erected, along with tasteful chapels and country houses, and statues in the style of Thutmose the Third or Nebuchadnezzar or Peisistratos, and Euriposes and Kanoposes and Mausoleums? It is the spirit alone that lives and creates life; but the spirit is not mocked, and far more evil and more barbaric than the periods in which it has not yet awakened are those in which it has vanished away, and has to be shammed.¹

And what happens in a period when the spirit has to be shammed? As Wilamowitz goes on to indicate, there is no immediate, obvious catastrophe; that comes later. There is simply a general erosion. Among other arts, the literature of the past is no longer sought out for its own life-giving properties, but retreats from life into the schools, and by them is naturally cut down to manageable and teachable proportions. A few, a very few, texts are selected for classroom use, and these are in a manner embalmed by elaborate paraphrases and interpretations, to make them intelligible to the now uninterested students. About this same period, as Wilamowitz supposed, some deservedly nameless pedagogue (or could it possibly have been a committee convoked

¹ Translated from Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf's *Einleitung in die griechische Tragödie* (reprint of 1921), page 176.

by some antique equivalent of a dean?) arrived at decisions about the Greek syllabus whose effects are with us to the present day: students should be required to read only seven dramas by Aeschylus, for instance, out of more than eighty; and likewise only seven out of the more than a hundred and twenty composed by Sophocles. Bearing in mind the fate of classical literature in the final centuries of the Empire, one may be tempted to formulate a universal rule: the anthologists arrive within the walls a century or so before the barbarians; people who have once lost the habit of going out and reading for themselves will gradually lose the capacity to love what they read or even to understand it. At least the rule may be worth testing against the conditions of our own time. It may be added that the teachers of those people, correspondingly, may before long become lost in trivialities themselves, like those scholars at the very end of classical antiquity who were to be found (as the phrase goes) “arguing over the vocative of *ego* amid the crash of empires.”

Renaissances

Yet there is something else of which a classics student is inevitably aware, simply in the pursuit of his or her trade; and that is the latent vitality and attractive power of the Greco-Roman culture. There have been many times since its collapse during which its arts, visual and written, even in partial ruin, have awoken a passionate urge not merely to enjoy or imitate them but to assimilate them, and to raise a new culture on their foundations. Perhaps Goethe’s breathless response to a mere black and white drawing of an original Greek sculpture may stand as typical of innumerable responses, across the ages, to classical work: “It is a fathomless depth of wisdom and strength; one becomes at once 2000 years younger and better; there’s no more to say; come and see!”² At many points in history, as we all know, there have been flare-ups of this

sort in societies as well as individuals: at the court of Charlemagne, for instance, and in twelfth-century France and England, and above all the great European conflagration that broke out in fourteenth-century Italy and smoldered, here and there, at least into the early part of the present century. During that greatest of renaissances, the classical component in European civilization was so strong and pervasive—even when its achievements were transcended, even when they were rebelled against—that no definition of European identity could fail to take it into account. Classical literature and art, and the postclassical literature and art of Europe, formed a continuum, the one not truly intelligible without the other.

The war of 1914–18, above all, put an end to that. If there now exists such a thing as a European identity—a European present to set against the European past that is the subject of this series—I doubt if anybody would claim that classical influence is a significant element in it. As will shortly be seen, some people are continuing to study the classical world, with great intensity, in North America as well as in Europe. Whether their activity is likely to facilitate yet another renaissance, in any way comparable to those we have seen before, is the ultimate question before this essay.

Crystal gazing in 1997

Back in the 1960s, when computers were just beginning to make an impact on society at large, some conservative-minded wit put about the rumor that a new device of titanic power had just been developed. It was the key to everything you could possibly need to know, and yet it could be carried in the hand and needed no cords or batteries; it had no name as yet, but provisionally it was being called Built-in Orderly Organized Knowledge, or **BOOK** for short. The assumption behind this joke had of course

2 Translated from Goethe’s letter to August and Ottilie von Goethe dated February 10, 1818.

prevailed in Western civilization since the days of the Hellenistic Greeks; no doubt the most famous example of it is in the last canto of the *Divine Comedy*, where the universe in all its knowable aspects is envisioned as a codex whose scattered leaves are bound together in God.

Three decades later, that assumption is no longer secure. Anyone who sets out to predict any aspect of future society must begin by acknowledging that we are now in the midst of a cultural transition compared to which the transitions from oral to written literature, and from manuscript to print, may prove to have been quite minor affairs. When the elementary schools are being wired for the Internet, who knows what is about to happen, for good or ill, to the entire educational and social structure? Is the book likely to preserve its primacy, or even, in the long run, its existence as an instrument of education or entertainment? Will the *word* (whether spoken or printed or just looming greenly on a computer screen) be able to make headway against the roaring torrent of visual images? Even in daily life the visual image seems to be taking over from the alphabet: if you want to dine, to escape a fire, or to find a lavatory, reading will not always help: you must learn to decipher pictograms, which in these emergencies will be crossed eating-irons, zigzag lines, and skirted or trousered silhouettes respectively.

At this stage, then, there can be no certainty about the future of the European past, or of the classical component in it. We may be heading toward the ultimate intellectual and aesthetic renaissance, toward a universal volume where all that human beings have achieved is present at the touch of a key—and the European past is really not a negligible part of what has been achieved. Or we may be heading toward nothing of the kind, but rather toward an infinitude of Platonic caves where lonely watchers sit under constraint, poring over a procession of shadows. My present assignment would have been very much easier to carry out in 1597, or even in 1897, than it is

at this moment. Nonetheless, I shall here attempt a short-term forecast, working forward as best I can from my observation of the present state of affairs.

The future of the classical past, I: image & translation

When once seen, the visual arts of the classical world, and the very landscapes and seascapes in which they are set, hardly require a propagandist. Most people, I think, at least those whose perceptions have not been skewed by educational ideologies, can fully understand the response of Goethe to his drawing of a Greek sculpture. All that is needed is what in Goethe's time was limited to a tiny elite, namely accessibility. Even now reproductions of unprecedented quality are widely available in that conventional medium, the book, to anyone who cares to consult a public library. Still greater wonders are being performed for ancient art and topography by electronic means; one need only refer to the Yale University Press's Perseus Project, with its vast computerized repertoire of images relating to ancient Greece. In this age of images, everything suggests that we are to expect more, much more, of the same kind of production. Everyman may before long take his stand with Zeus on the top of a virtual Mount Olympus, or build his own virtual Parthenon, reunited at last, virtually, with its Elgin Marbles.

The classical writers, too, have in recent years become more accessible in translation than at any time in history, particularly in the English-speaking world. The outpouring of English translations since the Second World War far surpasses in bulk that earlier great outpouring at the height of the English renaissance, in the reigns of Elizabeth and James. It must at once be admitted, however, that the stylistic quality of the modern translations is extremely variable. The Elizabethans and Jacobean knew instinctively how to make poetry sing in English, and prose, too, come to that (one

thinks not only of Sandys' Ovid, for instance, but also of Holland's Plutarch). They could therefore match, to some extent, the verbal harmonies that have always made Homer or Cicero so incomparably attractive to anyone lucky enough to read them in their own languages. It is forgotten, by many contemporary translators and by almost all their reviewers, that the ancient civilizations put as much sustained collective effort into the shaping of sentences and verse-forms as they put into the shaping of stone and clay, and that we can learn from them as much in the one medium as in the other. Whoever presents the world with a translation from a classical poet into cacophonous jargon disposed in lines of irregular length posing as verses may possibly be conveying something of the poet's story-line, but let's not pretend that he or she is presenting that poet, or supplying the reason why he has excited the ages.

Although translators in general should probably be held to a higher critical standard than they are, I find myself still very hopeful for the future of classical literature in translation. Two recent developments, in particular, and their wider effects, will be worth watching. The ongoing Oxford University Press series, *The Greek Tragedy in New Translations*, was founded by the late William Arrowsmith on the undeniable premise that not every classical scholar is gifted as a creative writer, and that few creative writers now have leisure for the prolonged savoring of the classics in the original. There are of course exceptions (the most outstanding one being no doubt Arrowsmith himself), and a few volumes in the new series are in fact by a single individual; most, however, are the combined work of a professional Hellenist and a professional poet. The results of these collaborations naturally vary from play to play, but the volumes that have appeared have this in common, that they are in a credible, speakable, rhythmic English able to capture the attention and feelings of a contemporary audience. There seems to be a very strong

case for extending this principle of collaboration from the translation of the tragedies to that of other classical literature in verse and prose. It is the abounding *life* of the ancient writings that strikes even a beginning reader in the original languages, and those who know how to put life into our own language should surely be invited to share in translating them.

An equally promising development is the practice of publishing classical translations not only in books but also in audio tapes.

Bearing in mind the fate of classical literature in the final centuries of the Empire, one may be tempted to formulate a universal rule: the anthologists arrive within the walls a century or so before the barbarians; people who have once lost the habit of going out and reading for themselves will gradually lose the capacity to love what they read or even to understand it.

Of course many works of literature from all ages and civilizations are now available on tape, but it may not yet be generally realized that to tape a classical poem or speech is a great deal more than merely to make it available to people too indolent to read, or people driving across the continent: it is in itself a necessary act of re-creative scholarship, since it means restoring the classical work to the very environment for which it was designed in the first place, namely the airwaves. One easily forgets that in Roman as well as in Greek culture most of what we call literature, though preserved by books, was realized in oral delivery. Oscar Wilde rightly explained one aspect of the excellence of Greek literature (being in this matter well ahead of the educational practice of

his time) in these words: "The test was always the spoken word in its musical and metrical relations. The voice was the medium, and the ear the critic." Hence to me, at least, the tapes published by Penguin Audiobooks of Robert Fagles's *Iliad* translation recited by the actor Derek Jacoby was one of the great classical breakthroughs of recent years, because it restored to Homer's poetry its full dramatic force, its interplay of human and divine voices, for the first time (so far as my knowledge goes) since the performances of the ancient Greek rhapsodes. The tapes of Fagles's *Odyssey*,³ recited by Ian McKellen, have also been recently released; but indeed every classical poem, speech, and history, as well as many works of philosophy such as the shorter dialogues of Plato, would respond wonderfully to a recording by a trained professional actor (we should no doubt want to draw the line at such technical works as Aristotle's *Categories* or Frontinus's *On the Aqueducts of Rome*).

Given speakable translations and interested actors, there is no reason why the entire corpus of classical literature should not be available in glorious sound, whether in audio recordings or on the Internet or both, within a few years. It may be added that a great many Greek classical texts—accompanied by the not-so-speakable translations found in the Loeb Classical Library—are currently available in the Perseus Project already mentioned, alongside the many images of the art, architecture, and sites. We seem, in fact, to be well within reach of a future in which all of classical culture will be present to anybody who wants it, freely, at the touch of a key.

Interlude: "But the spirit is not mocked"?

At this very point, perhaps, the thoughtful reader may uneasily recall Wilamowitz's vi-

sion of the second century A.D., quoted in the prelude to this essay. There, too, was a world united from one end to the other by the same material culture and the same education, a world in which (so far as the technology of the time allowed) all the achievements of past civilization were reproduced and placed at everyone's disposal—the statues in the Egyptian taste, or the Babylonian, or the archaic Greek, adorning comfortable villas, the ornamental canals and monuments modeled on this or that famous tourist site in Greece or the Near East. How little real commitment to the masterpieces of the past survived behind the Imperial facade was to become clear before very long, as the general erosion of ancient literature accelerated. It may seem that the real, the lasting culture is that which one has to go out and get for oneself, perhaps through great labor; not that which has to be laid on, piped in from outside like the water through the giant aqueducts.

The future of the classical past, II: the golden key

In the sixty-sixth chapter of his *Decline and Fall*, as he approached the reign of the last Emperor of the East and the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Edward Gibbon at long last rendered his judgment on the Greek language. He did so in a majestic sentence whose incantatory, almost psalmlike quality is best brought out if it is transcribed as verse:

In their lowest servitude and depression,
the subjects of the Byzantine throne
were still possessed
of a golden key that could unlock the treasures
of antiquity;
of a musical and prolific language,
that gives
a soul to the objects of sense
and a body to the abstractions of philosophy.

Everyone who has managed to read even a little ancient Greek philosophy or poetry in

³ *The Odyssey*, by Homer. Translated by Robert Fagles. Recorded on twelve audio cassettes by Ian McKellen; Penguin Audiobooks, \$45.95.

the original will, I think, feel the complete justice of this description. But it also serves as a most powerful reminder that in the last resort it is language that lies nearest to the heart, whatever society, whatever literature is under study. The future integrity of classical studies, if not their survival, depends ultimately on the future of Greek and Latin learning. Only if such learning continues can we look forward to genuine, first-hand research, or count on the honesty of future translations. Much the same, of course, will apply to the study of any of the other great national literatures that have arisen on the European continent; the future of the European past generally seems to be bound up with the future of language studies.

At a first glance, the promise for Greek and Latin language studies in the computer age seems bright indeed. CD-ROMs that make it possible to summon up every single occurrence of a given word, or collocation of words, in all extant classical Latin and Greek literature have already been available to students for several years, and we confidently expect the system to be vastly improved in the near future, with additions and corrections and with the extension of the chronological coverage into the medieval period and perhaps beyond. This resource alone means that the beginner who has just learned the Greek alphabet can instantly command more Greek (in a certain sense) than earlier scholars could command after a lifetime's engagement with the texts. Similarly, the ongoing project of electronically storing the secondary literature on the classics will mean that what was once perhaps the crowning skill of the veteran scholar—the ability to say where a treatment of a given subject may be found—is now fully in the beginner's hands. There is already a Latin bulletin board on the Internet (see *The New York Times*, October 28, 1996), and nothing that I can see prevents the establishment of an ancient Greek board, or of any other aids to self-improvement in the ancient languages, such as beginning or advanced courses in them.

Yet it has historically been true, and may

well remain so, that most people require an academic infrastructure to support them in the long and laborious process of mastering the ins and outs of a great literary language.

Anyone who sets out to predict any aspect of future society must begin by acknowledging that we are now in the midst of a cultural transition compared to which the transitions from oral to written literature, and from manuscript to print, may prove to have been quite minor affairs.

Paradoxically, the academic infrastructure for the study of Latin and Greek is at present far more extensive in America than it is in any European country. Since the Second World War, on both sides of the Atlantic, the study has been retreating from the high schools into the colleges and universities. Greek is taught only to a few high-school-age pupils, too often in devoted groups working unofficially on their own time. Latin, at any rate in the United States, is still widely taught at the high-school level but, by my observation, under serious difficulties; I have known gifted and spirited teachers almost reduced to despair by the pressure from parents and administrators to simplify the language to the extent that the whole exercise becomes meaningless.

As one might expect, conditions at the college and university level vary widely from country to country. In several European countries, the study of Latin and Greek seems practically confined to the graduate school and the research institute, touching the average educated person no more closely than, say, cuneiform studies or Old Church Slavic. In the United States, on the other hand, most colleges and universities

at present offer undergraduate majors in one or both of the classical languages. For various inescapable causes, this language instruction is no doubt less concentrated and strenuous than it was a couple of generations back, but a talented undergraduate can still work wonders with it. The United States can also boast far more numerous, and on the whole better attended, graduate departments of classics than can Europe. And it is perhaps here above all, in the graduate schools and in the professional teachers of classical learning who emerge from them, that we may best divine the future of the classical past. They are the key-bearers.

An innocent observer of the professional scene will probably be struck, first of all, by the enormous bulk of books and articles about the classics that professors, and even their graduate students, are now pouring from the presses. Never at any previous epoch in the long history of classical studies—not in Hellenistic Alexandria, for instance, not in Wilhelmine Germany—has there ever been anything remotely approaching such an output. Yet what might on a superficial view be taken for proof of an unequalled prosperity may actually prove a near-fatal weakness. The unfortunate fact is that almost every working scholar I know, whether beginner or veteran, agrees that most of this voluminous writing is useless and indeed worse than useless—that the enforced production of it discourages the necessary prolonged apprenticeship in the Greek and Latin languages, narrows the individual, and may yet stifle the profession. The time has probably come to examine very closely the two great requirements that now confront all prospective teachers of the classics at the university or college level: the writing of a dissertation before the conferring of a degree, and the early publication of a considerable quantity of other work either contemporaneously with the dissertation or shortly thereafter.

In nineteenth-century Germany, the classical dissertation was on the whole an effective device for ensuring that a student, after

many years of instruction at the school and university levels, was master of his trade and able to concentrate his learning on the solution of some hitherto unexplored problem in the classical field. Transplanted lock, stock, and barrel into the United States

An innocent observer will probably be struck by the enormous bulk of books and articles about the classics now pouring from the presses. Never at any previous epoch in the long history of classical studies—not in Hellenistic Alexandria, for instance, not in Wilhelmine Germany—has there ever been anything remotely approaching such an output. Yet what might on a superficial view be taken for proof of an unequalled prosperity may actually prove a near-fatal weakness. The unfortunate fact is that almost every working scholar I know agrees that most of this voluminous writing is useless.

during the latter part of the century, the dissertation requirement at first worked fairly well, but increasingly, as time has gone by, it has begun to suffer from two difficulties: objectively soluble problems of any significance have become harder and harder to find (except in certain specialties such as epigraphy, papyrology, or linguistics); and the graduate student has been arriving at the dissertation with less and less preliminary training in Greek or Latin or the many subdisciplines that a classical

scholar needs. Happily, there will always be one or two students who can astound their tutors by overcoming even such odds as these, and one still occasionally runs into a dissertation that truly contributes to knowledge and that has truly broadened its author's education. Yet on the whole the graduate student in classics is nowadays condemned to spend his or her last two or more years in graduate school—those priceless years which should allow leisure, for the only time in one's life, to assimilate the literature one has studied and to deepen one's acquaintance with other literature as well—in raking through a pile of practically unreadable secondary writing concerning the chosen topic of the dissertation and hectically trying to extract therefrom some fact, or some idea, that no one has hit on.

It seems that alternatives to this system ought to be under serious scrutiny by everyone who is concerned with the future of the classical past (or, I need hardly say by this time in the argument, with the future of academic studies in any area of language or literature). The best suggestion that I have heard of was put forward by William Arrowsmith years ago, at the University of Texas in Austin. It was simply that classicists should follow the example of some architecture schools, and allow those students who so wished to submit not a dissertation but a portfolio illustrating their work in its various aspects. Such a portfolio, he suggested, might contain proof of the student's understanding of the ancient languages, and of his own, in the form of original compositions in Latin and Greek, and well meditated, stylistically acceptable English translations from passages in the classics; one or more brief investigative articles on restricted problems not yet widely written on by the specialists; and one or more essays on history, or literary or artistic criticism. The idea, I think, might be worth experimenting with.

If only the problems ceased with the acceptance of the dissertation, as for a long time they did, the present system might be just tolerable. At that point, if no earlier,

our new member of the profession would be free to read more widely and deeply, and to consider at leisure where to go next in his or her research and teaching. In the last twenty-five years, all that has changed. Not only the major research universities but all

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institutions, including those devoted primarily to undergraduate teaching, have begun to expect even applicants for beginning positions or one-year temporary positions to have one or more published articles to their credit; while the aspirant to a tenured position is required (apart from many other qualifications) to be able to boast of one or even two published books, plus a number of articles. The results are obvious. There is the enormous outpouring of unnecessary publication, scarcely to be kept track of even with electronic help, that has already been mentioned—a mass of material towering ever higher between the observer and the prime objects of his or her observation, the original texts or the original stones. In the same process, the

good work that is done (and of course there is much good work) is obscured and choked out by the mediocre. As if all that were not damage enough, the narrowing effect of the dissertation requirement is now prolonged seven or even ten years further into our professor's teaching career. After he or she has achieved tenure, one must hope for the best. It is hard not to recall the Full Professor in Howard Nemerov's poem:

Publish or perish! What a frightful chance!
It troubled him through all his early days.
But now he has the system beat both ways;
He publishes and perishes at once.

But even if our professor escapes that cruel fate, his or her energies will from then on be increasingly distracted from the real job by the barren duty of reviewing the mounting pile of secondary literature turned out by aspirants to the profession. Such, I think, are the main threats posed to

Greek and Latin studies under the present system of appointment and promotion.

Even so, as far as one can reasonably foresee in 1997, factual knowledge about the classical past and the classical languages is likely to remain available in future to anybody who happens to want it. We are probably not about to lose any more masterpieces, as they did in the dying centuries of the Roman Empire. It is another question whether the academic infrastructure as it now stands can adequately support the masterpieces we have, allowing them to exert their full power on society, to mold its style and spark its imagination in yet another of that long series of renaissances. Outside the academy there are signs that such a renaissance is at least within the bounds of possibility; a reader of Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* or Derek Walcott's *Omeros* may well feel hopeful even now.

Whittaker Chambers: the judgment of history

by Hilton Kramer

No one who has, even once, lived close to the making of history can ever again suppose that it is made the way the history books tell it. With rare exceptions, such books are like photographs. They catch a surface image. Often as not, they distort it. The secret forces working behind and below the historical surface they seldom catch.

—Whittaker Chambers, *Witness*, 1952

You have not come back from hell with empty hands.

—André Malraux to Whittaker Chambers, 1952

Nearly half a century has passed since the fateful day in January 1950 when a jury in a Federal court in New York City found Alger Hiss guilty on two counts of perjury. That verdict effectively confirmed the charge brought by Whittaker Chambers that Hiss, his former comrade in a Soviet espionage apparatus in the 1930s, had betrayed his country as a Communist spy while serving as a high official in the U.S. State Department. Hiss, who had been with President Roosevelt at Yalta, had participated in the founding of the United Nations in 1945, and was president of the Carnegie Endowment for World Peace when Chambers first publicly identified himself as a Communist before the House Un-American Activities Committee in August 1948, went to jail as a convicted felon. Yet for the remaining forty-six years of his life—he died in November 1996 at the age of ninety-two—this once highly respected member of the

liberal establishment continued to insist upon his innocence. What is more remarkable, a great many intelligent people—those whom Chambers characterized in *Witness* as the “best people”—continued to believe him, or profess to believe him, even in the face of the mounting posttrial evidence that has reconfirmed his guilt. This is how Chambers described the situation at the end of *Witness*:

No feature of the Hiss Case is more obvious, or more troubling as history, than the jagged fissure, which it did not so much open as reveal, between the plain men and women of the nation, and those who affected to act, think and speak for them. It was, not invariably, but in general, the “best people” who were for Alger Hiss and who were prepared to go to any length to protect and defend him. It was the enlightened and the powerful, the clamorous proponents of the open mind and the common man, who snapped their minds shut in a pro-Hiss psychosis. . . . It was the great body of the nation, which, not invariably, but in general, kept open its mind in the Hiss Case, waiting for the returns to come in. It was they who suspected what forces disastrous to the nation were at work in the Hiss Case, and had suspected that they were at work long before there was a Hiss Case, while most of the forces of enlightenment were poohpoohing the Communist danger and calling every allusion to it a witch hunt.

It was, moreover, an inevitable corollary of this ardently held belief in Hiss's innocence that his accuser had to be stigmatized as a disreputable liar and fraud, if not indeed a malevolent madman. In that pernicious endeavor, which has persisted in some of the "best" circles down to the present day—hence the continued neglect of *Witness*, an autobiography of great literary and historical distinction—Hiss's liberal champions enjoyed an immense advantage. For upon the archetypal figure of the informer there has always been associated something odious and unclean. Americans, in their innocence, tend to be particularly unforgiving in this respect—more unforgiving, in this case, than about evidence of espionage. This, too, was a calamity that Chambers had clearly grasped when he put his life and his career at risk by informing on Alger Hiss.

That in his own self-interest Chambers need not have incurred that terrible risk is not something that is much appreciated even among people familiar with this celebrated case. It was, after all, within Chambers's power to have sidestepped the entire catastrophe. He could have refused to testify against a former comrade, and in the "best" circles he would have been lavished with praise for defying an unloved congressional committee. It is worth recalling that in 1948, as a writer for *Time* and *Life*, Chambers was enjoying an immense success in the only decent—and decently paid—job he ever had in his life. He was a happily married man with two young children and a farm in Maryland. He certainly knew what it was likely to cost him if, in naming Hiss as a Communist, he turned informer—and not only in public opprobrium.

"Some ex-Communists are so stricken by the evil they have freed themselves from," he afterwards wrote in *Witness*, "that they inform exultantly against it. No consideration, however humane, no tie however tender, checks them." His own view of the informer's fate was quite different. "By temperament," he wrote, "I cannot share such exultation and stridency, though I un-

derstand both. I cannot ever inform against anyone without feeling something die in me. I inform without pleasure because it is necessary."

Everything we know about the Hiss Case—including Chambers's sometimes misguided attempts to shield Hiss himself from the worst charge of all: espionage—attests to the truth of this assertion. Yet the "best people" were so eager to shield themselves from the awful implications of the Hiss Case that they refused to see in Chambers anything but a caricature of irrational anti-Communist wrath. With that caricature firmly established by liberal demonization, the reality of the man himself was effectively removed from enlightened discussion. So, for that matter, was the real Alger Hiss, who, for the "best people," remained safely concealed behind the mask of a New Deal pin-up boy, an exemplary figure of virtue and rectitude.

"I always felt that Whittaker was the most misunderstood person of our time," wrote Arthur Koestler at the time of Whittaker Chambers's death in 1961. "When he testified he knowingly committed moral suicide for the guilt of our generation. . . . The witness is gone, the testimony will stand." And so the testimony still stands a half-century later, with added corroboration turning up with greater and greater frequency from hitherto secret archives in Washington, Moscow, and Prague, with every passing year.

Yet Chambers himself has remained an elusive—indeed, an unknown—figure, and *Witness* an unread book. Alger Hiss had pronounced his former comrade "a psychopath," and many of the "best people" continued to believe him—even, it must be said, as their own belief in his innocence began to suffer some damaging doubts. Whatever the nature of those doubts, however, Hiss himself continued to be treated with a level of respect that was rarely accorded to Chambers outside the conservative anti-Communist press. You could sense that aura of respect in the obituaries and

death notices occasioned by Hiss's passing in November. In keeping with its liberal orthodoxy, *The New Yorker* published a sentimental, down-home eulogy by Hiss's son, and in *The Nation*, which for decades has made Hiss's innocence an article of faith, Victor Navasky called him "a model citizen." In a great many other accounts of Hiss's death, Chambers remained the usual caricature.

This is but one of the many reasons that the publication of Sam Tanenhaus's *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography* is a capital event.¹ For with this marvelous book a gifted writer of a generation too young to have any personal memories of the Hiss Case has undertaken to give us a life of Chambers that is not only scrupulously documented and dispassionately composed but also governed by precisely the kind of historical intelligence that has long been absent from critical accounts of its subject. *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography* is neither Cold War melodrama nor anti-Communist hagiography. It is the riveting story of a man of remarkable talents and remarkable suffering (remarkable flaws, too) who had the great misfortune to have "lived close to the making of history"—in his case, the history of the Communist movement in America.

It is thus, among much else, one of the best books ever written about the Communist experience in America—a narrative, as compelling as a good novel, that exhibits a profound understanding of what made a young man of Chambers's literary and intellectual gifts a Communist in the first place, what moved him to make his shattering break with the Communist Party, and then, faced with the horrific implications of the Hitler-Stalin pact in the summer of 1939, begin his long ordeal in attempting to alert the U.S. government to the operations of the underground espionage apparatus that had already penetrated the ranks of its

own bureaucracy at astonishingly high levels of responsibility.

Mr. Tanenhaus's book is also a chronicle of three troubled families caught up in the vortex of the political traumas of their time: the dysfunctional and somewhat disreputable family into which Chambers himself was born; the family he created when he married Esther Shemitz, a painter he met at gatherings of the John Reed Club in 1929, the year of its founding; and the Hiss family—Alger, his wife Priscilla, and their children—to whom Whittaker and Esther Chambers were far more closely attached than either Alger or Priscilla Hiss could ever bring themselves to acknowledge, lest the fiction of Alger's innocence be seen to be the spectacular act of mendacity it was.

Not the least of Mr. Tanenhaus's many accomplishments in this biography is the mastery he brings to his vivid accounts of the very disparate social milieux that shaped Chambers's life—and indeed, his character. To scenes as different as Columbia College in the 1920s, where Chambers formed his friendship with Meyer Schapiro, and the Communist bohemia of the late 1920s and early 1930s, where he met and married Esther Shemitz, and the atmosphere of the *New Masses*, the Communist journal in which Chambers made his first literary reputation; to the netherworld of the Soviet underground apparatus in Washington and the frantic regimen this imposed upon Chambers and his family, the terrors involved in his flight from Party discipline, his emergence as a writer for *Time* and his subsequent involvement with William Buckley's *National Review*—to these and a good many other diverse subjects essential to his story Mr. Tanenhaus brings a first-rate narrative gift and an undecieved grasp of political nuance. The cast of characters he is obliged to deal with is enormous, and enormously varied. In what other biography are we likely to find figures as different as Meyer Schapiro and Richard Nixon? Yet Mr. Tanenhaus somehow manages to give us a persuasive account of all of them without allowing them to divert his

1 *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography*, by Sam Tanenhaus; Random House, 656 pages, \$35.

narrative from its central focus on Chambers himself. At times even his footnotes contribute something essential to the narrative without interrupting it.²

It is, however, in its account of the Hiss Case and its aftermath that Mr. Tanenhaus faced his greatest challenge, for the story of the two Hiss trials has been brilliantly recounted at least twice before: first in *Witness* and then in Allen Weinstein's *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case* (1978). Yet on this subject, too, the challenge is triumphantly met in Mr. Tanenhaus's narrative. For one thing, he brings to it a spare, unornamented prose that renders the complexity of the courtroom drama with a clarity and concision it has never before been given. There is nothing here of the anger and remorse and bitter disappointment that colored Chambers's own account of the trials in *Witness*. At the same time, there is no need—as there was Mr. Weinstein's *Perjury*—to conduct an uphill battle against liberal opinion by piling on an overabundance of incriminating detail. Mr. Tanenhaus takes nothing for granted in his account of the Hiss trials, yet at this distance in time and after his own deep immersion in the evidence that was at issue, he well understands that history has already rendered its judgment in the Hiss Case, and tells the story accordingly.

He well understands, moreover, that the judgment of history has effectively reversed the judgment of the “best people” at the time of the trials themselves. Then it was Hiss, the convicted felon still proclaiming his innocence, who was deemed to be the

hero and martyr of the affair, and Chambers, who had rendered his country a great service, who was put down as a turncoat and a villain. Now, at last, it is more widely recognized with what cold contempt for his country and for the truth Hiss continued to lie—to his loyal supporters as well as to us.

Writing about the effect of the Hiss trials on Chambers, Mr. Tanenhaus recalls:

No one seemed to acknowledge that he too was a casualty of the case, with an “incurable wound.” Scarcely a word was written about Chambers's tribulations—on the career he had lost; on the manifold indignities he had withstood, the gossip, the strenuous defamations; on the pain to his family. Instead, he remained for many the monster conjured up by Lloyd Paul Stryker, “bland, dumpy, and devious,” in one assessment.

About the refusal of the liberals to acknowledge Hiss's guilt, Mr. Tanenhaus is also very persuasive in recalling us to the views of the anti-Communist Left at the time of the trials and its immediate aftermath:

This failure, suggested one shrewd analyst, the literary critic Leslie Fiedler, grew out of “the implicit dogma of American liberalism,” which inflexibly assumed that in any political drama “the liberal *per se* is the hero.” For Hiss's supporters to admit his guilt also meant admitting “that mere liberal principle is not itself a guarantee against evil; that the wrongdoer is not always the other—“they” and not “us”; that there is no magic in the words “left” or “progressive” or “socialist” that can prevent deceit and abuse of power.”

About the trials and their aftermath, too, Mr. Tanenhaus's summary is definitive: “Every major question was met and answered. What sets the Hiss Case apart, then and now, was not its mystery but the passionate belief of so many that Hiss must be innocent no matter what the evidence.”

Reading the account of Chambers's last years in Mr. Tanenhaus's book, I was re-

2 This one, for example, about the fate of Lionel Trilling's novel, *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), in which the character of Gifford Maxim was based on Chambers, whom Trilling had met when they were undergraduates at Columbia in the 1920s: “It puzzled Trilling for many years that his publisher, Viking, did not reissue the novel in 1948–49. Since the book bore many intriguing parallels to the Hiss Case, it was likely to excite fresh interest. Unbeknownst to Trilling, Viking's publisher, Ben Huebsch, was a Communist and had quietly offered his services to the Hiss defense.

minded of the final chapter in Arthur Koestler's autobiography, *The Invisible Writing* (1954). Quoting from an attack upon his work by Raymond Mortimer, the former literary editor of *The New Statesman* and *The Nation*, who had written that "if I find Mr. Koestler's writing unlikeable, it is because he accepts as normal what I believe and hope is abnormal," Koestler responded as follows about the experience of his own generation, which was also Whittaker Chambers's:

It was entirely normal for a writer, an artist, politician or teacher with a minimum of integrity to have several narrow escapes from Hitler and/or Stalin, to be chased and exiled, and to get acquainted with prisons and concentration camps. It was by no means abnormal for them, in the early thirties, to regard Fascism as the main threat, and to be attracted, in varying degrees, by the great social

experiment in Russia. Even today, about one quarter of the electorate in France and Spain, and a much higher percentage among the intellectuals, regard as "normal" to vote for the Communist Party. Even today the displaced persons, the scum of the earth of the post-war era, number several millions. Finally, it was quite normal for six million Europeans Jews to end their lives in a gas chamber . . . Yet the majority of well-meaning citizens . . . believe and hope that prisons and firing squads and gas chambers and Siberian slave camps just "do not happen" to ordinary people unless they are deliberately looking for trouble.

This was the kind of knowledge of history that Chambers, too, brought to his mission as an informer in the Hiss Case and, as a writer, in *Witness*. It is a similar command of the history of our time that makes *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography* essential reading for the present generation.

The importance of T. E. Hulme

by Roger Kimball

The fundamental principle of all morality is that man is a being naturally loving justice. In Emile I have endeavored to show how vice and error, foreign to the natural constitution of man, have been introduced from outside, and have insensibly altered him.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The “classical” point of view I take to be this. Man is by his very nature essentially limited and incapable of anything extraordinary. He is incapable of attaining any kind of perfection, because, either by nature, as the result of original sin, or the result of evolution, he encloses within him certain antinomies. There is a war of instincts inside him, and it is part of his permanent characteristics that this must always be so.

—T. E. Hulme

“The history of philosophers we know, but who will write the history of the philosophic amateurs and readers?” Thus did the Imagist poet and essayist T. E. Hulme begin “Cinders,” a posthumously published collection of notes and aphorisms about art, life, and language that he scribbled in his early twenties while traveling across Canada working on railways, farms, and in timber mills. Hulme (the name is pronounced “Hume”) was himself a conspicuously philosophical amateur. Or perhaps one should say “amateur philosopher” (I use “amateur,” as he did, in its most flattering sense). Among much else, he was a trans-

lator and—for a few years, anyway—champion of the work of the French philosopher Henri Bergson; he was an early and voluble reader of Edmund Husserl, G. E. Moore, Alexius Meinong, Georges Sorel, Max Scheler, and other difficult, path-breaking thinkers; he was the first to disseminate in England Wilhelm Worringer’s ideas about the “urge to abstraction” in art; he was an enthusiastic proponent of certain strains of avant-garde art, an implacable critic of others. Above all, Hulme was a committed if idiosyncratic Tory, an ardent propagandist for “classicism” and “the religious attitude,” an adamant scourge of pacificism and anything that he could construe as “romanticism” or “humanism.”

Today, Hulme merits an extended footnote in the history of English modernism—the high modernism of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wyndham Lewis. In her recent edition of Hulme’s writings for Oxford’s Clarendon Press,¹ Karen Csengeri calls Hulme “one of the most misunderstood figures in twentieth-century letters.” He is at any rate one of the most fugitive. Hulme is one of those curious figures whose influence outruns his achievement—or at least whose achievement is difficult to reckon by the usual standards. The aesthetic movement with which he is most closely as-

¹ *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme*, edited and with an introduction by Karen Csengeri; Oxford University Press, 489 pages, \$89.

sociated—Imagism—is, as René Wellek observed, based on ideas that are “extremely simple and even trite.” Poetry, Hulme wrote in one typical exhortation, should be “a visual concrete” language that “always endeavors to arrest you, and to make you continuously see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process.”

Well, OK. But even in the Teens that was not exactly press-stopping material. And Hulme’s own poetry? In bulk, anyway, his contribution was comically modest. “The Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme” consists of five short poems first published together as an appendix to Ezra Pound’s *Ripostes* in 1912. Of course, the title was partly a joke. But it was hardly an exaggeration. Hulme’s total poetic *oeuvre* runs to eight poems, the longest of which is fourteen lines. They belong to the same genre as Pound’s famous “In a Station of the Metro.” Here is “Autumn”:

A touch of cold in the Autumn night—
I walked abroad,
And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge
Like a red-faced farmer.
I did not stop to speak, but nodded,
and round about were the wistful stars
With white faces like town children.

Charming, yes; memorable, probably; but surely rather . . . *small*. It is not surprising that Hulme approvingly quotes G. K. Chesterton on the difference between old and new poetry: “the old dealt with the Siege of Troy, the new attempts to express the emotions of a boy fishing.”

Hulme’s philosophical musings are more ambitious, but he not did make any notable theoretical advances. He was an amusingly original character but not—as his friend Michael Roberts acknowledged—“an original thinker, he solved no problems.”

Sometimes, however, articulating problems can be as fruitful as solving them. In his book *Romantic Image* (1957), Frank Kermode devotes an entire chapter to Hulme.

Kermode winds up being highly critical, almost dismissive, but he does admit that Hulme was “in some respects, the most influential” member of his literary coterie. Many critics come away from Hulme feeling this way. He was somehow more than the sum of his parts. Hulme was a human tuning fork, vibrating powerfully to certain intellectual and spiritual currents. And—what turned out to be more important—he managed to set off vibrations in others.

Perhaps the eminence who responded most vividly to Hulme’s example was T. S. Eliot. In 1924, seven years after Hulme’s death, his friend the art critic Herbert Read assembled a chrestomathy of Hulme’s writing and published it under the title *Speculations*. Writing in *The Criterion*, Eliot lavished praise on both the book and its author. *Speculations*, he wrote, is

a work of very great significance. In this volume [Hulme] appears as the fore-runner of the twentieth-century mind, if the twentieth century is to have a mind of its own. Hulme is classical, reactionary, and revolutionary; he is the antipodes of the eclectic, tolerant, and democratic mind of the end of the last century.

“Classical,” “reactionary,” suspicious of the “democratic mind”: Eliot had no higher encomia. In his Clark lectures of 1926, Eliot referred to Hulme as “the most *fertile* mind of my generation.” Elsewhere, he described him variously as “the most remarkable theologian of my generation” and a “great poet.” “The poems of T. E. Hulme,” Eliot wrote in “The Function of Criticism,” “only needed to be read aloud to have an immediate effect.”

Of course, not everyone was as susceptible to Hulme’s spell as Eliot. Ezra Pound, for example, soon became disenchanted with the cult growing up around Hulme, and did everything he could to minimize his role in defining the Imagist aesthetic. “Mr. Hulme is on his way to mythological glory,” Pound complained in the 1930s, dismissing

one appreciative study of Hulme with a summary, Poundian “bullshit.”

If Hulme has remained a somewhat shadowy figure, one reason is that he has, until now, been poorly served by his editors. In 1955, Samuel Hynes published a second Hulme miscellany, *Further Speculations*, and other writings by Hulme have appeared in appreciations (now out of print) by Michael Roberts and Alun Jones. But Herbert Read's *Speculations* is the volume most people interested in Hulme know. As Karen Csengeri points out in her introduction to the Oxford edition of Hulme's writings, *Speculations* provides a highly misleading view of Hulme's thought. The essays are arranged more or less in reverse chronological order, and Read provides no clues to their dates of composition. Thus the volume opens with “Humanism and the Religious Attitude,” a version of Hulme's very last piece of philosophical writing that Read abridged and adorned with his own title. (Csengeri prints the original version under Hulme's title, “A Notebook.”) Read also left out several important essays, slighting Hulme's political writing, his writing about art, and his writing about the war. Even more problematic was Read's inclusion of so much of Hulme's writing about Bergson. As Csengeri notes, *Speculations* makes Bergson “seem to be the centre-piece of Hulme's intellectual life, instead of simply an important step to the extremely individual views of his later work.” Hulme was not a systematic thinker, but his thought did develop out of a consistent world view; *Speculations* obscures both the development of Hulme's thought and its underlying emotional consistency.

Although occasionally marred by typos—“Hulme” printed as “Hume,” mangled Greek (and in a Clarendon Press book!), etc.—this new edition of Hulme's writing deserves praise. Not only has Csengeri done a professional job of editing and annotating Hulme's text, but also she has supplied a balanced and insightful introduction that goes a long way toward situating Hulme's

achievement. She recognizes Hulme's virtues as a thinker—above all his “intellectual honesty”—but does not overstate his importance. In short, she has made newly accessible to us the work of a neglected conservative thinker of great if fragmentary suggestiveness, formidable rhetorical skill, and keen passion.

Thomas Ernest Hulme was born in September 1883, in North Staffordshire to a family in comfortable circumstances; his father was a gentleman farmer and businessman. In 1902, Hulme won a mathematics exhibition to St. John's College, Cambridge. A teetotaler himself, Hulme apparently consorted with some who were not. He was at any rate sent down in 1904 for what Herbert Read delicately called “indulging in a brawl.” (A college document that might have slipped out of Bertie Wooster's dossier mentions “over-stepping the limits of the traditional license allowed by the authorities on Boat Race night.”)

Read correctly noted that Hulme's temperament was “not one that could submit readily to an academic mould.” After being sent down, he knocked about London and studied briefly at the University of London before embarking on his trek across Canada. Succeeding years found him in Brussels, back in London lecturing to the Poets' Club, in Bologna for a meeting of the Philosophical Congress, absorbing ideas from Pierre Lasserre and *L'Action française* in Paris, and from Worringer in Berlin. His writings appeared regularly in A. R. Orage's magazine the *New Age* and other journals. In 1912, he applied to be readmitted to St. John's. Henri Bergson supplied a rousing letter of recommendation (“... un esprit d'une grande valeur . . . rare qualités de finesse, de vigueur, et de pénétration”) and Hulme was duly readmitted. Instead of continuing his studies, however, Hulme had to flee the country when an enraged father threatened to prosecute him for trying to seduce his sixteen-year-old daughter. When the war came, Hulme was quick to enlist; in April 1915, he was wounded and sent home to recuperate. The following year

he was granted a commission in the Royal Marines Artillery and returned to the front.

"Always seek the hard, definite, personal word," Hulme admonished in "Cinders." In the course of his short life—he was just thirty-four when killed in action near Nieupoort, Flanders, in September 1917—Hulme ostentatiously sought the hard, the definite, the impersonally personal in every aspect of his life. The sculptor Jacob Epstein—a close friend—proudly noted that Hulme "was capable of kicking a theory as well as a man downstairs when the occasion demanded." Epstein's bust of Hulme is reproduced on the cover and frontispiece of *Speculations*. It reveals an English officer right out of central casting: chiseled features, neatly trimmed moustache, reserved and coolly assessing gaze. A monocle and riding crop would not have been out of place.

Force of personality was one reason that Hulme—a young provincial, after all—was able to make such an impression on his generation. Force of style was another. Hulme commanded a brisk, tonic prose; just as he favored the concrete image over abstraction in poetry, so he managed to endow even the most abstruse philosophical issues with palpable immediacy. Hulme's essays and lectures tend to be episodic and epigrammatic. In places, they seem inconsecutive; they are never rote. Reading Hulme is intervening in a vigorous intellectual quest, cheerful, serious, impatient. Typical is the way he begins the important essay "A Tory Philosophy" (1912, and not, incidentally, included in *Speculations*): "It is my aim to explain in this article why I believe in original sin, why I can't stand romanticism, and why I am a certain kind of Tory."

Hulme's pugnacious style made him particularly effective on the attack. "A Tory Philosophy" is in part a brief for what he calls the "classic" world view, a view that, suspicious of claims to moral progress, emphasizes order, discipline, and tradition.

Hulme realizes that such prescriptions were not new, but he is careful to distinguish his own brand of classicism from others he regards as spurious. Here, for example, is what he has to say about Nietzsche:

Most people have been in the habit of associating these kinds of views with Nietzsche. It is true that they do occur in him, but he made them so frightfully vulgar that no classic would acknowledge them. In him you have the spectacle of a romantic seizing on the classic point of view because it attracted him purely as a theory, and who, being a romantic, in taking up this theory, passed his slimy fingers over every detail of it. Everything loses its value. The same idea of the necessary hierarchy of classes, with their varying capacities and duties, gets turned into the romantic nonsense of the two kinds of morality, the slave and the master morality, and every other element of the classic position gets transmuted in a similar way into something ridiculous.

Philosophically, Hulme was not at all in Nietzsche's league; but his observations are to the point and, as far as they go, quite devastating. One feels that Hulme could have done for Nietzsche what Nietzsche did for Wagner.

Hulme could be especially brutal about his contemporaries. An avid admirer of Jacob Epstein's sculpture, he did not take kindly to obtuse criticism of Epstein's work. In "Mr. Epstein and the Critics" (1913, not in *Speculations*), he reviews some of what he considers the most egregious writing about Epstein's art. He devotes hilarious attention to one Anthony Ludovici, who, as it happens, was an early (and notoriously muddled) commentator on Nietzsche. "What," Hulme asks, "is the particular type of charlatan revealed in this book on Nietzsche?"

Mr. Ludovici, writing on Nietzsche, might be compared to a child of four in a theatre watching a tragedy based on adultery. . . . You picture then a spruce little mind that has crept into the complicated rafters of philosophy—you imagine him perplexed, confused

—you would be quite wrong. . . . [On the contrary, he] blots out all the complexity which forms the reality of the subject, so that he is simply unaware of its existence. He sees only what is akin to his mind's manner of working, as dogs out for a walk only scent other dogs, and as a Red Indian in a great town for the first time sees only the horses. . . . That a man should write stupid and childish things about Nietzsche does not perhaps matter very much. . . . But when a little bantam of this kind has the impertinence to refer to Mr. Epstein as a "minor personality" . . . then the matter becomes so disgusting that it has to be dealt with. The most appropriate means of dealing with him would be a little personal violence. By that method one removes a nuisance without drawing more attention to it than its insignificance deserves.

Hulme was more subtle, and perhaps more effective, in his attacks on the pacifism of Bertrand Russell and the Bloomsbury art critic Clive Bell in "War Notes," the miscellaneous commentaries he wrote while convalescing in 1915–16. Herbert Read described Hulme as "a militarist by faith." This is misleading. Hulme was hardly insensitive to the horrors of the war. Nor was he a thoughtless hawk. In "Diary from the Trenches," which originated as letters to his family, he wrote that life in the trenches was "a kind of nightmare, in which you are in the middle of an enormous saucer of mud with explosions and shots going off all round the edge." "As soon as you had seen someone hurt," he noted, "you began to look at shelling in a very different way": "there is nothing picturesque about it. It's the most miserable existence you can conceive of."

Hulme understood and indeed sympathized with the pacifist revulsion at war. But he also understood that, in the war with Germany, what was at stake made that revulsion a form of moral cowardice. "What is being settled in the present war," Hulme observed, "is the political, intellectual, and ethical configuration of Europe for the coming century." The "enlightened" pacifi-

cism of Russell and Bell arose from an ideology that "finds no place whatever for the heroic," that deeply discounted the importance of honor, and that was prepared to sacrifice virtually any principle for the sake of peace. Hulme had nothing but contempt for it. "It comes to this," he wrote, "that for the emancipated man death is too great a price to pay for anything. Life and comfort are the ultimate goods." Noting the Socialist rhetoric with which the well-to-do Bell was wont to festoon his pacifist protestations, Hulme made an observation that is as pertinent and withering today as it was in 1916: "It is a widespread but entirely mistaken idea to suppose that you amend for the advantages of wealth by asserting verbally that you are a Socialist."

Emphasizing the idea of original sin; proclaiming a classicist aesthetic; disparaging the romantic ideology of progress; insisting on the importance of honor and physical courage: in these and other ways Hulme was about as politically incorrect, *avant la lettre*, as it was possible to be. That, in fact, is one reason he remains fresh and engaging. But there are deeper reasons for the importance of T. E. Hulme. His opinions were the product not of superficial attitudinizing but a passionate engagement with fundamental spiritual questions. Hulme lived at a moment when cataclysmic social change and naïve optimism about the power and beneficence of rationality combined to threaten the survival of any values not subject to a utilitarian calculus. As Csengeri notes, a major source of Hulme's passion was "fear that the modern world, carrying with it a scientific and philosophical baggage from the Victorian past, was trying to merge the sphere of values with that of science. To allow the two to be merged could only lead to the destruction of the ethical." In this, as she points out, Hulme looks forward to many later thinkers, including Wittgenstein.

At bottom, no matter what the subject at hand, Hulme spoke as a moralist. In "Cinders," he proclaimed the irreducible plurality

of the world and issued nominalistic warnings about the seductions of language: "Symbols . . . picked out and believed to be realities." His long flirtation with Bergson developed because he hoped that Bergson's notion of "intuition" could provide a convincing response to the dehumanizing, mechanistic world view that, gaining ground everywhere around him, threatened to obliterate the very idea of moral freedom and transform the world into a place where "the word 'value' has clearly no meaning." Hulme eventually repudiated Bergson because, under the influence of Pierre Las-serre, he came to believe that Bergson's solution rested on a species of sentimentality—that it was, in fact, "nothing but the last disguise of romanticism." Finally, Hulme was attracted to Wilhelm Wor-ringer's theory about the origins of abstract art because he believed that it presaged the renewal of a fundamental spiritual resource that had been obscured by a long addiction to superficial humanism: "the re-emergence of geometrical art," Hulme wrote in "Modern Art and Its Philosophy," "may be the precursor of the corresponding attitude towards the world, and so, of the break up of the Renaissance humanistic attitude."

Many of Hulme's critics have been quick to point out that his use of terms like "humanism" and "Renaissance"—to say nothing of "romanticism" and "original sin"—is Pickwickian at best. They are of course correct. But there is an important sense in which such criticisms are beside the point. Hulme did not pretend to be a scholar: he was after not accurate verbal taxonomy but an accurate description of man's spiritual condition. Thus, for example, he freely acknowledges that he is "not . . . concerned so much with religion, as with the attitude, the 'way of thinking,' . . . from which a religion springs." Any threat to this way of thinking, he believed, was also a threat to the spiritual integrity of man. What he called "romanticism" was naturally hostile to the religious attitude because it encouraged sentiments of delusive self-infatuation. The "root of all ro-

manticism," for Hulme, was the belief that "man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities; and if you can so rearrange society by the destruction of oppressive order then these possibilities will have a chance and you will get Progress." Again, there are plenty of Romantics (including, some would say, Hulme himself) to whom this description does not apply. But Hulme's characterization located a spiritual temptation that is as alive today as it was when he wrote.

In a famous passage from his essay "Romanticism and Classicism," Hulme remarks that "part of the fixed nature of man is the belief in the Deity."

By the perverted rhetoric of Rationalism [he continues], your natural instincts are suppressed and you are converted into an agnostic. Just as in the case of the other instincts, Nature has her revenge. The instincts that find their right and proper outlet in religion must come out in some other way. You don't believe in God, so you begin to believe that man is a god. You don't believe in Heaven, so you begin to believe in a heaven on earth. In other words, you get romanticism. The concepts that are right and proper in their own sphere are spread over, and so mess up, falsify and blur the clear outlines of human experience. It is like pouring a pot of treacle over the dinner table. Romanticism then, and this is the best definition I can give of it, is spilt religion.

The exact nature of Hulme's own religious beliefs is a matter of some dispute; but one need not, I think, subscribe to any particular credo to see the power of his objection: "That man is in no sense perfect," as Hulme put it elsewhere, "but a wretched creature, who can yet apprehend perfection." It is not perhaps a cheerful philosophy, but it has the advantage of being true. Which was why Hulme concluded that he did not "put up with the dogma for the sake of the sentiment, but . . . may possibly swallow the sentiment for the sake of the dogma."

John Crowe Ransom: Tennessee's major minor poet

by Richard Tillinghast

For a generation of readers influenced by the literary criticism of T. S. Eliot, the distinction between “major” and “minor” poets is an accepted commonplace. The implication, of course, is that a major poet is somehow better than a minor. Most of us, however, reserve a valued place in our reading lives for the “great minor poet”—someone whose work is of the highest distinction, is original and memorable, and gives great pleasure, but who lacks the grand ambition to make, like Milton or Dante, a major philosophical or religious statement; to define, as Homer, Virgil, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Yeats, and Whitman did, an epoch or a national or ethnic identity.

It can be a relief to turn from these top-heavy, “major” goliaths to artists we think of as minor. Samuel Johnson took the measure not only of Milton but of other literary greats when he wrote: “*Paradise Lost* is one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again. None ever wished it longer than it is.” “Minor” poets escape some of the burdens associated with the ambition to be great, and often their verse is purer and more pleasurable as a result. They seem content to go about the business of writing poems, doing justice to what they perceive and intuit, creating objects of delight and insight without laboring under the burden of explaining history, defining the national psyche, or boring us with their “genius.”

Every lover of poetry will have his own list of favorites. My own short and incomplete list would include several names from the English Renaissance—Robert Herrick, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell—and several Americans, including Robinson Jeffers, Theodore Roethke, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop. Among the modern English, Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, Stevie Smith, and U. A. Fanthorpe. Among the Irish, Louis MacNiece, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon. At the top of my list of great minor poets would be John Crowe Ransom (1888–1974), who published fewer than 160 poems, whittling that number down to 80 in his *Selected Poems*. He was active as a poet for about eleven years, between 1916 and 1927.

As a critic, Ransom was in no doubt of where he stood on the major/minor question. He agreed with what his friend Allen Tate wrote in a letter in 1926: “I’m afraid Eliot is about right in saying there are no important themes for modern poets, hence we all write lyrics.” In 1938, in his critical book, *The World’s Body*, he pointedly defends the genre:

The virtue of formal lyrics, or “minor poems,” is one that no other literary type can manifest: they are the only complete and self-determined poetry. There the poetic object is elected by a free choice from all objects in the world, and this object, deliberately elected and carefully worked up by the adult poet, be-

comes his microcosm. With a serious poet each minor poem may be a symbol of a major decision: it is as ranging and comprehensive an action as the mind has ever tried.

Ransom wrote, at his best, with unexampled serenity and mastery. For the student of metrics, the way his line employs traditional English meter without ever being monotonous never ceases to amaze. In the opening quatrain of "Blue Girls," the first three lines, though they are in iambic pentameter, all begin with an accented syllable rather than the expected unaccented first syllable of the iamb. The last line contains only three beats. Because of the way the lines begin with "strong attack" (propelled metrically by the spondee or trochee) and because of the shorter last line, the stanza glancingly alludes to the classical Sapphic stanza; yet the *abba* rhyme scheme, associated with Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, suggests an elegiac tone.

You can appreciate the genius of Ransom's rhythms by artificially marking out the first two lines as if they followed the strict iambic pentameter meter. The first line has the expected ten syllables; the second is the same, with an extra unstressed syllable giving the line a feminine ending:

x / x / x / x / x /
Twirling your blue skirts, travelling the sward,
x / x / x / x / x / x
Under the towers of your seminary . . .

That stilted and deliberately tin-eared scansion gives the norm, the base meter against which Ransom, and all the other great metricists—including Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Keats, Yeats, Frost, and Auden—work. (To readers with a well-developed ear, as well as anyone who has ever read Paul Fussell's little gem, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, this is all commonplace. I apologize to them: they are few in number.) Here's how the line really goes. (I am using the mark \, to represent a secondary stress, accented to be sure, but not emphatically):

/ x x \ / / x x /
Twirling your blue skirts, travelling the sward
/ x x / x x x / x \ x
Under the towers of your seminary,
/ / x x x / x / x / \ x
Go listen to your teachers old and contrary
x / x / x x /
Without believing a word.

Part of the beauty of the first line lies in the spondaic effect of "blue skirts" followed, after the caesura or pause, by the additional accent that occurs in the first syllable of "travelling," the last two syllables of which a good reader wants to elide for the sake of the phrasing. The line is a little rhythmical unit with two almost identical phrases, each beginning with the same consonant sound and each suggesting a triplet rhythm, like a measure of music with a triplet laid across the 4/4 meter. (The first line of the second stanza echoes that rhythm, though not exactly, with "white" and the first syllable of "fillets" echoing "blue skirts," and "then" providing the accent that begins the second half-line.) The third line attacks strongly, its imperative emphasized by the spondee in the first foot: "Go listen," and ending with the graceful feminine ending on "seminary"—an old-fashioned name for a private school, incidentally, not necessarily suggesting a school of theology. The last line has a very strong anapestic (x x /) feeling. Here's the second stanza unsullied by scansion markings:

Tie the white fillets then about your hair
And think no more of what will come to pass
Than bluebirds that go walking on the grass
And chattering on the air.

The "fillets" or headbands will make readers with some memory of the Latin poetry they read in school think of the stylized fasciae of the maidens that grace classical verse.

At the same time that the poem stirs up our latent memories of classical poetry, "come to pass" alludes to the cadences of the King James Bible, which the young Tennessean must have heard every Sunday,

perhaps every day, as a child. Classical and Biblical—the Hellenic and Hebraic strains that Matthew Arnold identifies in *Culture and Anarchy*—are twin poles between which Ransom’s expression oscillates. A third impulse that animated his poetry was modernist, and a whiff of this may be detected in the diction of the quatrain’s last line: “chattering on the air.” *On* rather than *in*, which we might expect.

Speaking of Ransom’s classical side, the poem’s message is, of course, pure *carpe diem*, as the third stanza makes clear:

Practise your beauty, blue girls, before it fail;
And I will cry with my loud lips and publish
Beauty which all our power shall never
 establish,
It is so frail.

Ever since my first reading of this poem forty years ago, I have felt that “loud lips” violates the tone. But it is part and parcel of Ransom’s ambivalent flirtation with modernist rhetoric. “Blue Girls” was included in Ransom’s book *Chills and Fever*, which Louis Untermeyer in his Introduction to Ransom in his anthology—for decades the bible of modern poetry—characterizes as “unquestionably the best volume of poetry to be published in 1924.” That description not only carries, nearly seventy-five years later, a charming whiff of yesterday’s literary passions; it places Ransom as a highly visible figure in the early years of literary modernism. Ransom and Eliot shared the same birth year: 1888. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” had been published seven years before; *The Waste Land*, not a favorite of Ransom’s, was only two years old. “I have the feeling,” he wrote Allen Tate in 1943, “that *Waste Land* is much like Picasso’s *Guernica*, which I dislike. Also much like Dali’s surrealism, which has all sorts of fine detail and no composition.”

To the Biblical, the classical, and, with reservations, the modernist, we should add a fourth focal point: the local or domestic.

When I heard Ransom read “Blue Girls” in Sewanee, Tennessee, in the late 1950s, he mentioned in passing that “of course” we would know that the girls in the poem were students at the Ward Belmont School in Nashville, because of their blue uniforms. When he says, in “Lady Lost,” “So I will go out into the park and say,/ ‘Who has lost a delicate brown-eyed lady/ In the West End section?’” to readers in the wider world this would be some generic West End in some anonymous city; to readers in Middle Tennessee, he would naturally be understood to allude to the West End neighborhood in Nashville. Eliot had London, Yeats had the West of Ireland, Frost had New England, Joyce had Dublin, Faulkner had his Yoknapatawpha County: Ransom had Middle Tennessee, Nashville in particular.

While Memphis and West Tennessee had to wait until almost 1820 and Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act for the Chickasaws and Choctaws to sell their land and move west, thereby opening the land to white settlement, Nashville was settled in the eighteenth century by pioneers who crossed the Appalachians and settled the rich farming country in the middle of the state. East Tennessee was a remote mountainous region, its poetry the traditional ballads brought over from the British Isles. Middle Tennessee was, and is, proud of its cultural heritage, in particular an educational tradition based on the moderate Protestantism of Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians. John Crowe Ransom’s father, John James Ransom, had been a missionary to Brazil and at the time of his son’s birth was a minister in the Tennessee Conference of the Methodist Church. Of the poet’s grandfather, himself a minister, it was said, “No man in the Conference can equal Dick Ransom in the purity of his English.” The young Ransom would have discovered his vocation among the books in his father’s library.

The Middle Tennesseans of Ransom’s class were farmers and professional men. “Minor gentry” might be the right term for them; they were not wealthy, they were not

large landowners. They were religious and they were literate. The Methodist minister, the choir director, the lawyer, the farmer who had books in his house, the country doctor, the schoolteacher were fixtures of this society. Thomas Daniel Young, in his biography, *Gentleman in a Dustcoat*, describes the future poet's summer vacations at John James Ransom's two-story brick parsonage at 337 East Main Street in Murfreesboro, Tennessee: "Ransom played tennis, visited, read, and enjoyed his mother's excellent cooking, and in the evenings the family often gathered in the parlor to hear Annie play the piano or to read together a novel by Dickens or Thackeray." A wholesome, high-minded way of life which would not be out of place in provincial, nineteenth-century England. Before television and air conditioning, some of the most important moments in Southern life were transacted on the region's broad porches and verandas on warm summer nights. As Young writes:

On some evenings, usually when the girls were away for some reason or when Annie was busy with one of her music students, Ransom and his father would sit on the front porch and discuss religion, politics, philosophy, or literature. Often these discussions became so animated that Mrs. Ransom would caution them to hold their voices down; otherwise, she would say, the "neighbors will think you are quarreling."

The sociable, well-regulated life of the Middle Tennessee gentry is effortlessly rendered in this quatrain from "Miriam Tazewell," following a freak storm that has destroyed the garden:

The spring transpired in that year with no
flowers
But the regular stars went busily on their
courses,
Suppers and cards were calendared, and some
bridals,
And the birds demurely sang in the bitten
poplars.

After studying at Oxford as Tennessee's Rhodes Scholar, Ransom returned to this country and eventually taught at Vanderbilt University. His eminence as a professor there spawned the Tennessee branch of that flowering of literature in the South which is sometimes called the Southern Renaissance — misleadingly, because there was little in earlier Southern literary culture to be reborn. This was a birth, not a rebirth. Few professors could boast of having nurtured a better crop of students. At Vanderbilt, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Andrew Lytle, and Donald Davidson were among Ransom's students. Robert Lowell, having met Ransom through Ford Maddox Ford and Allen Tate, had gone to Nashville to study with him, then moved to Kenyon when Ransom was hired away to found *The Kenyon Review* in 1937. Randall Jarrell took a writing class from Ransom as a sophomore at Vanderbilt; when Ransom went to Kenyon, his protégé, who was by that time a graduate student, accompanied him as an English instructor and Kenyon tennis coach. The novelist Peter Taylor withdrew from Vanderbilt and followed this group of writers to Kenyon a year later.

It may have been Ransom's eminence as New Critical hierarch, literary arbiter, and editor of the most influential quarterly of its time that led readers to take his poetry for granted. Since readers of this essay may not have easy access to Ransom's poems, it may be worth mentioning that the Knopf hardcover edition of his *Selected Poems* (1991) is at this writing still in print. I'll quote one poem in its entirety. "Janet Waking," which shows how Ransom investigates a domestic scene, putting it in perspective through the use both of Biblical rhetoric and of another weapon in his rhetorical arsenal not mentioned so far in this essay: the big, Latinate word used for humorous effect. Here is "Janet Waking":

Beautifully Janet slept
Till it was deeply morning. She woke then

And thought about her dainty-feathered hen,
To see how it had kept.

One kiss she gave her mother.
Only a small one gave she to her daddy
Who would have kissed each curl of his
 shining baby;
No kiss at all for her brother.

“Old Chucky, old Chucky!” she cried,
Running across the world upon the grass
To Chucky’s house, and listening. But alas,
Her Chucky had died.

It was a transmogrifying bee
Came droning down on Chucky’s old bald
 head
And sat and put the poison. It scarcely bled,
But how exceedingly

And purply did the knot
Swell with the venom and communicate
Its rigor! Now the poor comb stood up
 straight
But Chucky did not.

So there was Janet
Kneeling on the wet grass, crying her brown
 hen
(Translated far beyond the daughters of men)
To rise and walk upon it.

And weeping fast as she had breath
Janet implored us, “Wake her from her
 sleep!”
And would not be instructed in how deep
Was the forgetful kingdom of death.

A master of rhetoric, who can play or be serious at will, is at work here. Even beginning the first declarative sentence on the adverb *beautifully* is evidence of mastery. So is the grace of “Till it was deeply morning.” The *abba* stanza, enclosing two lines of pentameter within two lines of trimeter, is decorative and elegant. Unusual for Ransom, most of the rhymes are full, with only the well-chosen inexactness of “daddy” and “baby” lending the second stanza a rumpled intimacy, and the lovely “Janet”/“upon it”

of the next to last stanza adding to the poem’s sense of amused gravity.

The second stanza runs the risk of being too mundane—an example of where the domestic poet can run into problems with tone. This poem, like many of Ransom’s, encompasses the domestic sphere within the larger world, as is clear when Janet runs “across the world upon the grass/ To Chucky’s house.” Word-choice plays a major role in this encompassment, most noticeably with the “transmogrifying bee.” Whether this ironic use of the humorously long Latinate word within a context of plain quotidian events owes something to T. S. Eliot’s practice in his *Poems* (1920), it is hard to say. Here are two quatrains from Eliot’s “Whispers of Immortality,” about Grishkin; famously “Uncorseted, her friendly bust/ Gives promise of pneumatic bliss”:

The sleek Brazilian jaguar
Does not in its arboreal gloom
Distil so rank a feline smell
As Grishkin in a drawing-room.

And even the Abstract Entities
Circumambulate her charm;
But our lot crawls between dry ribs
To keep our metaphysics warm.

Reviewers in the early Twenties detected a resemblance between these poets, one working in a London bank, consorting with the likes of Lady Ottoline Morrell and the Sitwells, the other living in Nashville, close to home at the center of the Fugitive literary group. *The New York Times Book Review* in 1924, commenting on Ransom’s book *Chills and Fever*, mentions the “sophisticated obliqueness” that made the reviewer think of Eliot. Babette Deutsch detected the influence of Eliot and Laforgue. Where Eliot is arch, dry, cosmopolitan, and sexually conflicted, Ransom is arch, dry, deliberately provincial, and very much the *pater familias*.

The irony of what Ransom accomplishes by word-choice is similar to what Faulkner does in his fiction, giving us the experience of an educated mind looking down into a

simpler world. Later in the poem, the role of language in mediating between levels of experience is emphasized by the dead hen's being characterized as "Translated far beyond the daughters of men." This last phrase alludes of course to the New Testament, where Christ calls himself "the Son of Man." "Rise and walk" in the last line of the stanza is gravely reminiscent of Christ's miracles, where the dead are called to wake and the lame to walk.

Ransom mixes modernist with old-fashioned country rhetoric to the extent that it is hard to tell which linguistic realm "put the poison" comes from. The poem's emotional distancing, in describing how the bee sting swells "exceedingly/ And purple," is extended with a bit of quirky humor: "Now the poor comb stood up straight/ But Chucky did not." This gesture weds the sophisticated adult's disinclination to feel too deeply so small a matter as the death of a hen, with the grief a parent experiences when his child undergoes what is for her an important loss. In the second stanza, the family members appear in third-person guises. Only in the last stanza, as the poem reaches its most emotionally intense moment, do they become "us." The ending is among Ransom's most beautiful, with its ironic use of "would not be instructed" showing the pain and futility of trying to explain the mystery of death to a child. The phrasing attains added dignity through the graceful inversion, "in how deep/ Was." Finally, one can only stand in awe of this poet's control of tone, witnessing the finely calibrated curve that lets him rise from "her daddy/ Who would have kissed every curl of his shining baby" to the magisterial "forgetful kingdom of death."

"With a serious poet each minor poem may be a symbol of a major decision." That obiter dictum by Ransom which I quoted at the beginning of this piece might be taken as a comment on his own practice. Equally, a poem in twenty quatrains might be the microcosmic equivalent, for a "minor" poet, of the epic. Ransom wrote two such minia-

ture epics: "Armageddon" and "Captain Carpenter."

"Armageddon" is an eighty-line narrative of the encounter, couched in terms of mock-chivalric combat, between Christ and Antichrist. The poem entertains, with the gleeful high spirits that issue from an artist engaging in pastiche with easy mastery, the dualities this philosophically minded poet was fond of. From the poem's first quatrain, the brio, the virtuoso use of rhythm, rhyme, and word-choice, tell us that we are in for a rare spectacle:

Antichrist, playing his lissome flute and merry
As was his wont, debouched upon the plain;
Then came a swirl of dust, and Christ drew
rein,
Brooding upon his frugal breviary.

As strange and brilliant as the verbal surface is, the tale Ransom has to tell easily rises to the level of his poetic skills. It takes an unexpected turn when the two eternal adversaries, instead of fighting, discover a common sympathy:

Antichrist tendered a spray of rosemary
To serve his brother for a buttonhole;
Then Christ about his adversary's poll
Wrapped a dry palm that grew on Calvary.

In the poem a new concord, a state of innocence, where "the Wolf said Brother to the Lamb," comes into being. But Ransom is too seasoned an observer of human nature to suffer for long this equilibrium, this resolution of dualities. On the scene appears "a patriarch,/ A godly liege of old malignant brood" who interrupts the love-feast between the two, with the result that "Christ sheds unmannerly his devil's pelf,/ Takes ashes from the hearth and smears himself,/ Calls for his smock and jennet as before," and takes the field of battle (to the tune, no doubt, of "Onward Christian Soldiers"):

Christ and his myrmidons, Christ at the head,
Chanted of death and glory and no
complaisance;

Antichrist and the armies of malfeasance
Made songs of innocence and no bloodshed.

We all know who wins. But with an ironic twist the last, sympathetic word goes to Antichrist: "These Armageddons!" he said; and later bled."

Ransom's better known epic-in-miniature is "Captain Carpenter," the mock-chivalric story of an unfortunate quixotic campaigner—"I thought him Sirs an honest gentleman/ Citizen husband soldier and scholar enow," whose fate is to lose every battle he fights, parting successively with his nose and ears, getting his legs and arms broken, finally having his "sweet blue eyes" plucked out. Even after all this damage, he soldiers on:

Captain Carpenter got up on his roan
And sallied from the gate in hell's despite
I heard him asking in the grimmest tone
If any enemy yet there was to fight?

Many indignities await him at this point in his travails. Ransom narrates them all in a mock-solicitous tone in which pathos and hilarity mix in almost equal parts: "I would not knock old fellows in the dust/ But there lay Captain Carpenter on his back . . ."

The poem is, it would seem, an allegory, owing something, perhaps, to Spenser. Many have identified the unfortunate captain with the Confederacy. But the beauty of Ransom's fable is the way it teases us, tempting us to assign an identity to the hero-victim, but always dancing just beyond reach. Randall Jarrell's comments, in his essay, "John Ransom's Poetry," are pertinent: "Some of Ransom's queer fabulous allegories are close, in form, to Kafka's. If you read 'Captain Carpenter' (or *Metamorphosis*, for that matter) to a quite uncultivated

audience, it will be delighted with what happens but puzzle about what it means."

Whether he gave up poetry or whether poetry gave him up, we have no way of knowing. But during his eleven years in the art John Crowe Ransom succeeded in accomplishing what few poets have been capable of doing. Young writers today talk about "finding a voice": I suspect Ransom would have found that amusing. I doubt that he ever lay awake at night worrying about "voice"; yet his is one of the most distinctive in the history of poetry. More importantly, and beyond being a past master of his medium, he had a world, a culture, a point of view, and a language.

His world was the farms and small towns of his native Tennessee. Behind that geographical and cultural territory lay the whole of Western civilization; by background, education, and inclination, he was on intimate terms with most of it. Medieval European culture, rooted in Christian theology and folk myths sublimated to a noble code of aristocratic behavior, stirred his imagination with its images of chivalry, purity, courage, the opposition between good and evil, light and darkness. His point of view was that of a cultivated, classically trained man who never lost interest in the demotic world. His ironic detachment found, not without difficulty, a language for itself, shaped from classical literature, nineteenth-century oratory, and the Bible. The conversation between the agrarian and the classical—as American as Thomas Jefferson—was mirrored in the interplay between the Anglo-Saxon and Latinate strands of English. The final touch to this miraculous, unlikely mix was the challenge posed to his adamantly traditionalist sensibility by high modernism.

Poems

by William Jay Smith & John Foy

Happiness

Sorrow is human, what of happiness?
The monster that is carved on Ishtar Gate
with fish-scaled back, bright eye, and clawed hind feet
is not so strange. And strange but not so sweet
the scent of violets in early spring
when newly rich, low-reaching branches sway,
and clear cold water bubbles from the sand
to bathe a carefree schoolboy's naked feet.

Yes, happiness is human: touch of hair
and hand; now where we go a trumpet vine
announces us upon a gilded stair;
and joy is real, and happiness is rare;
and so we kiss, and kiss again, and twine,
while roosters toss gold coins into the night.

— *William Jay Smith*

The shipwreck

Old age is a shipwreck: these thin days
we wander on a bitter alien shore
where howling wind has bent the twisted trees,
and moss-rimmed rocks rise blurred along the edge
out of a Chinese scroll.

The waves before us climb with their unending roar,
and we gather up the timbers of the ship
that broke apart;
and build, as once we did as children long ago,
lean-tos for refuge from the wind.

The fog rolls in—makes islands in the mind—
that we visit for a moment and then lose,
then find again and try again to reach
while with the swirling salt sea-spray
incessant wind moves in and carries them away.

But there are days like this when all is calm and clear:
the sun sweeps through, and we are young again,
laughing in a garden round a keg of beer,
the college towers bathed in golden light
as in a painting by Vermeer—
with the city that he saw across the river,
caught, out of time, and then recalled forever.

—*William Jay Smith*

from Rue des Martyrs

I have a sense of place
in this room enriched by scarcity:
unadorned walls, cold-water sink,
my cracked casement window
where I hear the bells that ring
— the sound of things required
among the domes of Sacré-Coeur,
unconditional domes, in mist, rising
like something hardly real,
a vision that may or may not exist,
though that distinction is ineligible
up here among hoodlum pigeons
at the quiet drifting edge,
where I've come to find a place of sense.

*

Did you hear something in the corridor,
a complaint on the landing,
the rattle of a long-neglected door
touched by night drafts in the building?
Did Madame Antonini climb the stairs?
Would she be in the storage room
at 3:00 A.M., bedeviled and sere,
looking for spiders to kill with a spoon?
Didn't you hear it? I heard something
like wind in the wires, a knock,
someone somewhere crying
more softly than my bitter clock,
something barely audible
transpiring at the bottom of the hall.

*

I look out from my weather-cracked window
at lights on the horizon at night
—a thousand propositions. Three compel the eye:
a red, blue, and green all in a line
between the Panthéon and St. Sulpice.
Luminaries keeping their distance,
three weird lithium girls
beyond time's power to dispel,
their desire safely disembodied
which otherwise could move the world.
Each night they come back glimmering
with Aristotelian clarity
—no question yet, no overture,
but already they know my name.

—*John Foy*

Letter from Cape Town

The silence in South Africa: writers chuck it in

by Sarah Ruden

Peter Horn is a poet and critic who spent decades in outspoken opposition to apartheid. His fights with the establishment in the universities, his patronage of young black writers, and the total publication ban under which he worked for a time evoked so much domestic and international sympathy as to make the quality of his writing—and he happened to write extremely well—irrelevant. His academic reputation was comfortable, and he received actual—even literal—acclaim. He remembers poetry readings at political rallies, with cheering audiences of several thousand. Now he is thinking of emigrating. Part of his frustration has been the five-year wait for prize money owed him by a writers' organization which moved mostly on political energy and is now stumbling like a wino.

J. M. Coetzee is one of Horn's colleagues on the faculty of the University of Cape Town. Some of Coetzee's novels are set in apartheid South Africa, but he has never made explicit political statements. His most famous works, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *The Master of Petersburg*, are, respectively, a fable about the frontier of an imaginary authoritarian country and a historical fiction about Dostoevsky. Though Coetzee is well set up to prosper in the new era, he prospers not as a voice of South Africa but as an international writer merely emanating from the Third World, a writer like Gabriel García Márquez or Salman Rushdie. All three (even poor Rushdie,

lately) are away from home a great deal and take a cosmopolitan view of things.

I don't blame them. A fellow American I had run into, a recent English B.A. who was visiting the University of Cape Town, came back to me to ask on which wall he could find the directory containing J. M. Coetzee's name and office number. Then the young man went and photographed the directory at interesting angles. Coetzee gets no fawning like this from his own countrymen. I am helping a fellow junior faculty member to organize a "Writers at UCT" program of literary readings for the next freshman orientation. We have realized that we must keep each reading quite short, so that the students do not start to make noise. We are convinced that ten minutes of J. M. Coetzee, for example, reading his own work will be too much—but we won't have the embarrassment of pointing this out to him, because he knows. And when we introduce him with a rudimentary biography, as someone the students have never heard of, he will understand. His patience is renowned. But why shouldn't he pursue happiness overseas, where he doesn't have to go through this?

What will be the national literature after apartheid? By national literature, I mean writing by people living here, showing in some important way what life here is like—Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* qualified, but nothing qualifies now. One obstacle is that, whereas the reality of apart-

heid was something the world wanted to hear about, something that gave hope of change and encouraged a feeling of righteousness, the situation in the country now is more like the opposite. South Africa is a small country: the world at large was able to put the fear of God into the government. And South Africa's code of laws was explicitly evil: it was both easy and satisfying to condemn, especially on the part of nations (any guesses as to which one in particular?) which had rid themselves of comparable laws. But if you look at South Africa today, it is hard not to conclude that it was inefficient to single out the place for human rights attention in preference to, say, Tibet. But this is of course an uncomfortable conclusion. Domestically, among those who fought apartheid, there is more than discomfort. "Despair" would probably not be too strong a word for what conscientious people feel when they see that the removal of the old system has not improved people's lives. But the feeling seldom gets voiced publicly. Sometimes journalists hint at their despair, but writers—in their greater need for personal popularity, and with their traditional role as spokesmen for the future—almost never do. The more open society becomes, and the more they know, the less they can say.

What would writers say about the treatment of African women by their men in this richest and most democratic of sub-Saharan African countries? Awkwardly, given liberalism as the way in which most writers have been trained to see the world, there is much more than colonialism, and its offshoots such as apartheid, behind Africa's problems. There is also the fact that women cannot act in their own interest or the interest of their children, especially in decisions about how many to have. It may sound simplistic if I say that in Africa famines and civil wars cascade from this helplessness, but it is revealing to look at courtship, for instance, in relation to how many more people the continent has every year to share its few possessions.

In black townships in South Africa a typical teenage boy goes up to a girl as young as eleven and says, "You're my girlfriend." When the two are alone, he says, "Take off your panties, lie down, and open your legs." Many of the girls have no idea what is going to happen, and none think they have a right to question the orders of a man, even of a young one they barely know. If this situation is a corruption of African culture caused by the Western influences of urbanization and the loss of tribal protections of women, it is ironic that rural districts are in some ways worse, with polygamy, widows burned as witches, and lobola, the dowry system in which, to get a divorce, a woman without property rights must find a way to give her husband's family back as many cows as they used to purchase her from her parents. (At least we don't have female circumcision here—that's farther up north. The circumcision of boys during their initiation rituals is bad enough, though; every year hundreds wind up with infections requiring hospitalization, and a single drunken or incompetent witch doctor can change the gender profile of a whole generation of villagers.)

How would you write about this? If you were writing about Africa, you could hardly avoid the topic of women. If your novel were set in an Antarctic research camp, it wouldn't be an African novel, now, would it? And you can hardly write about a topic without letting your opinions show, however indirectly. Would you try to fudge it, blame imperialism, colonialism, Western hegemony, when you know in your heart that the West is not—certainly not entirely—to blame? Would you blame Africans, even partly, after all they have been through? Would you suggest, as some politicians have, that there is a compromise possible, that an American—or rather Scandinavian—style bill of rights can somehow allow people to sell their teenage daughters? Or, given the chance, would you move to Canada, join an advertising firm or write computer manuals?

It is even more difficult here to say what

you think about race—along with culture the most important and interesting issue. There isn't a single educated person in southern Africa who hasn't wondered about genetic differences in average racial intelligence, and if anybody says he hasn't he is a liar and will burn in hell for his wicked, wicked lies. But even in thinking about the subject the educated are useless and doomed due to their privilege. Take me, for example: I am a white American who read Plato in a public school and went to Harvard on endowment funds. (I am not at all an exceptional member of the South African university community, by the way: my estimate is that a third of the faculty, of the historically white institutions at least, comes from North America and Europe.) Not only does my cat eat better than my maid's children ever did—that's a cliché, but it still shames, because it's true—but he has probably had a better education as well. At least nobody beat him for expressing an opinion, no matter what kind, no matter on what—the normal method of discipline in black schools. I feel like a monster even to wonder whether it is partly because of genetics that black Africans in general don't achieve. But, but—it is very strange how much less black pupils achieve in math than in languages, and how little intervention does.

Somebody—a journalist or academic if not a writer, anybody who under apartheid helped force onto the government a realistic assessment of the future—ought to talk about this. The regime has decided to invest heavily in math and science education, planning for a high-tech economy in spite of steady disappointment in mining and manufacturing, and in spite of tourism and agriculture looking far more like the site of competitive advantages. I may seem to be exaggerating the importance of intellectuals, and by American standards I would be exaggerating, but things are different over here. Only in the Soviet Union have intellectuals played a more important role in changing society. As in the Soviet Union, a walk down a main city street in South Africa

shows how the need for change did not disappear when intellectuals lost their clout. Scruffy, scarred black children sleep on the middle of the sidewalk; a thin, inebriated colored (mixed-race) man has stationed himself at an empty parking place: if someone wants to park, the colored man will perform for a consideration the services of gesturing at the space and not etching all over the car with a piece of brick as soon as the driver is gone. Many people have ideas as to what, besides apartheid, caused all of this, and what, besides government smiles and speeches or the choice of Johannesburg as the site for the Second Coming, might help, but the ideas are not what South Africa or the world wants to read. Not even journalists put these ideas into print. Life here is hard enough, with the psychotic drivers, and phone and power outages starting to happen at the same time. Why go out of your way to make everybody hate you, too?

Aside from the likely personal and professional cost of saying what you think, there is the question of whether you will even be able to say it in the future. The black government may end up more intolerant of dissent than the white one was, but the intolerance would have nothing special in it to evoke tenderness for the victims. Another black African government would be putting down civil rights, that would be all. Mandela and his aides already scold the press for negative reporting that might discourage foreign investment, and new black administrators at universities threaten academics for their "Eurocentrism"—even the historian Charles van Onselen, who spent a good part of his research career compiling a heartbreaking biography of a black South African sharecropper,¹ is supposed to be Eurocentric. "Face the consequences," "world opinion held prisoner," "will be dealt with," "will be held accountable," even "will be

¹ *The Seed Is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Share-Cropper, 1894–1985*, by Charles van Onselen; Hill and Wang, 649 pages, \$16 paper.

tamed,” are phrases officials direct at intellectuals. The attitude is that journalists and writers and scholars are something like screwdrivers: under apartheid, they were instruments for taking apart apartheid; now they are instruments for building a prosperous, multi-racial society as the regime rather precisely plans it; all you have to do is turn the screwdrivers the other way.

I myself recently found out how small the space is for inconvenient speech. I won the Central News Agency Award, one of the country's two or three most important book prizes. Each year, there is an Oscar-type ceremony in Johannesburg, with winners in all categories getting a chance to say a few words. My words were against South Africa's continued manufacture and stockpiling of land mines. The agreement to halt export had come a few weeks before, but there seemed to be no willingness to take a further step. (The reason, incidentally, is “jobs,” and it says something about media shyness that the government has not heard any remark to the effect that slavery created more jobs, or that more jobs depend on how the Swedes and the Danes feel about South Africa's arms trade than on the arms trade itself. I was tempted to make remarks like these.) I read aloud a letter from victims of land mines pleading for a total and worldwide ban. On TV the next morning (public TV—the government sponsors the only three channels available without cable or a satellite dish), the news reported my name and the title of my book, but then cut to one of the runners-up speaking softly against child abuse in an interview, and identified her as me. This would have been tough to pull off as a mistake: the entire ceremony was filmed. I was quoted accurately in the print media, but that doesn't reassure me as much as it might. The government takes a specific swipe at newspapers every few weeks, on the grounds that private and international ownership is twisting the reporting; and there is talk of a state news service. What fun. Official African news services have offered the Soviet-style scoop on grinning delegations

and tractor repair, and thrown in royal ceremonies with enough accessories of endangered species origin to get the entire board of directors of the World Wildlife Fund swallowing pills with alcohol. In South Africa, we could get daily coverage of Mandela's colorful shirts.

I have concentrated on freedom of expression because I am an American. Young South African-born writers put their concerns differently. There are plenty of gifted young writers around, by the way. My favorites are the poets Arthur Attwell and Rustum Kozain, who record with passion and eloquence what it has been like to grow up here. They and others would say that the obstacles are economic: the book trade is a cartel, with high retail prices, and only a minority of the population can read well anyway. But even the people who can afford to buy books and know what to do with them are not buying. This would change were not educated South Africans, black and white both, exhausted by their identity. They don't want to read about themselves; they don't want to hear from among themselves even about the personal, let alone the political. They want to look at wildlife calendars. America, for its part, doesn't want to hear anything out of Africa unless it sounds like American history, only more so. Apartheid was perfect. With apartheid gone there is only complexity and irony, a story without any ending, let alone one that makes us feel good.

I do feel like Eeyore right now. I'm sorry. What is something cheerful I could say? Alright, here's something: I am sure there will be no outright censorship for a few years. But my diagnosis as an American writer in South Africa is different, of course; I have higher hopes and lower expectations. I hope for a Western-style democracy, with full freedom of expression. (The “African democracy” theory is merely a bizarre interpretation of the fact that authoritarian governments have been here a long time; the people must want them, the theory goes.) I hope for democracy, but I know

that America's social and political freedoms came from unusual circumstances: the movement of oppressed peoples into a land where they could manage their own affairs for the first time but had to struggle consciously to establish and maintain nationhood; add to this the best leadership and ideology to emerge from the Enlightenment, and economic opportunity enough to bury old class systems.

We should stop being surprised that we can't transfer the result of all of this anywhere we want to; but of course the next step, leaving the Third World to do what it

usually does, or even endorsing its usual insectoid governments, is more than we could bring ourselves to. There is no solution to this problem, but that doesn't mean that Americans admit it quickly, and I understand why, having spent three years in South Africa. We just don't think it's fair. God gave us so much. Doesn't He call us to share it? Why wouldn't He give us the means to share it? But for young South African-born writers, who could do a lot toward healing their country, all of this isn't about theology. It's about the continent falling on them and pinning them flat.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the recent publication of *Rebel Angels: Twenty-five Poets of the New Formalism*, edited by Mark Jarman and David Mason (Story Line Press, \$25; \$12 paper), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

Adaptable properties

by Mark Steyn

It was the playhouse in which George M. Cohan scored his first success, back in 1904: in *Little Johnny Jones*, Cohan, a brisk, cocky flag-waver, offered marching songs for both his country ("I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy!") and his profession ("Give My Regards to Broadway"). Instead, the present owners of the Liberty Theatre have decided to flip the finger to Broadway. As part of the current "renewal" of 42nd Street, the Liberty is destined, it seems, to become an "interactive video arcade." Since the Yankee Doodle boy departed, the theater has seen Fred and Adele Astaire in the Gershwins' *Lady, Be Good!*, and Adelaide Hall introducing "I Can't Give You Anything but Love" in *Blackbirds of 1928*; but, even in its more recent incarnation as a porno house, its clientele of sad, old, masturbating losers were, in a very real sense, far more "interactive" than the video patrons will prove to be. Indeed, strolling along the newly Disneyfied 42nd Street, you're painfully aware that these sparkling emporia require nothing from us other than utter passivity. I'm not yet ready to wax nostalgic about the hookers and hustlers, pimps and pushers of the old 42nd Street, but, if our only weapon against the depraved excesses of so much of modern life is bland, homogenized, unfelt, synergized-to-the-hilt multinational "product," we're in big trouble. The latter is just as degrading and enfeebling, and even more insidious. T. S. Eliot's line, in the *Four Quartets*, about being "distracted from dis-

traction by distraction," rings peculiarly forlorn in the context of New York's new theatrical theme park: we're so distracted, we don't realize these distractions aren't even truly distracting.

When Deborah Warner chose the Liberty for her staging of *The Waste Land*, she couldn't have foreseen how totally 42nd Street's wasteland would be transformed into just another Waltland: a couple of doors down from the peeling, derelict Liberty, the New Amsterdam is being refitted as the flagship for Disney's stage versions of its animated movies. If anything, Miss Warner reckoned, it made the Liberty an even more appropriate venue for *The Waste Land*; for what could be more terrifying than a theater in which grown-ups go around pretending to be cartoon characters?

Miss Warner is one of the most self-effacing and satisfying directors on the London stage, preferring carefully thought-through productions to meretricious concepts. With *Don Giovanni*, most directors rattle through the recitative at breakneck speed, frantic to get back to Mozart's greatest hits: otherwise, audiences get restless. Miss Warner read it differently, seeing the piece as a thriller played out in real time, from its opening rape through the wedding party to the Don's final rendezvous in the flames of Hell—in a single evening. Played as one almighty bender, it all falls into place: after all, every night in London, bargain-basement Don Giovannis lurch from one joint

to another until finally, blind drunk, they stagger out of the last club at 3:00 A.M. and wonder, "Where now?" If the Devil showed up and said, "Hey, Hell's still open," more than a few would take him up on it. It's typical of Deborah Warner, though, that, in seeing this approach through to its logical conclusion, she chose to stage all that recitative in real time also—in other words, as conversation. Never mind that it was in a foreign language, with the recitative slowed down and staged with brilliant clarity and intensity, audiences were gripped and followed these passages as closely as if they were naturalistic dialogue scenes.

Miss Warner's most intense productions have been with her on-stage alter-ego, Fiona Shaw—most notably an electrifying *Electra* for the Royal Shakespeare Company. *The Waste Land* came about when (as I mentioned *en passant* a couple of months back) the Samuel Beckett estate yanked the rug out from under them and shut down their production of *Footfalls*. So they turned to Eliot. *The Waste Land*, like all his most important poems, is a dramatic monologue, and has far more genuine dramatic tension than any of his plays, almost all of which are pointless experiments in form. It says everything about our automatic assumption that Eliot is no man of the theater that his most admired play, *Sweeney Agonistes*, is unstageable. In that sense, Eliot's place in the record books as lyricist of Broadway's longest-running musical is not a freakish aberration but a fine symbolic distillation of the paradox in his work: his least theatrical writing is his writing for the theater. Shuffling through the lobby of the decayed Liberty, past the scaffolding and polyethylene, and awaiting Miss Shaw's entrance into a space lit only by bare bulbs placed at random around the stage, we would seem to be a world away from the Winter Garden. The set for *Cats* is supposed to look like a junkyard, but, of course, it looks merely like a set for a high-tech musical; *The Waste Land's* "set" is a junkyard—an assemblage of miscellaneous debris in a place

that looks like it's awaiting the arrival of the wrecking ball. (Still, it's worth noting that, even as a crumbling husk, the Liberty's acoustics and sightlines are superior to many Broadway houses, and that, with a restored pit, it would be perfect for just about any play or musical this side of *Starlight Express*.)

Yet, though much of the press coverage was keen to emphasize that this was "T. S. Eliot without cats," at heart Warner and Shaw were engaged in exactly the same exercise as Andrew Lloyd Webber and Trevor Nunn. Structurally, *The Waste Land* is less obvious than *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*—its characters aren't labeled and given big "I am" statements—but they require similar variations in voice and tempo. Thus, almost like a musical in skeleton form, Miss Shaw's one-woman show has solos and duets and full choruses, and is scored with a careful eye on the balance between formal arioso ballads and bawdy comedy numbers. For the former, there's "The Burial of the Dead," which Miss Shaw enacts with a kind of hymnlike translucence; for the latter, there's the pub scene from "A Game of Chess," with the "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME"s barked out in a raucous demotic; and, in between, come at least a dozen subtly orchestrated moments that make this evening so memorable—for example, the tinge of disgust with which Miss Shaw imbues the sexual episode in "The Fire Sermon." She is a spiky, severe figure with close-cropped hair, yet, simply by crossing the stage, removing her cardigan and standing at a different angle to a different light bulb, she's able to effect a plausible, unobtrusive shift from deep tragedy to music-hall and back again. *The Waste Land* is sprinkled with song quotations—"that Shakespearian Rag," "London Bridge is falling down"—and lines that have become as memorable as song lyrics—"April is the cruellest month," "fear in a handful of dust"—but, even so, it's surprising to be reminded by the musicality of Miss Shaw's performance of just how *unmusical* *Cats* is, of how leaden and earthbound its charac-

terizations are. I don't want to force the comparison, but it's entirely appropriate that even Miss Shaw's strongest physical characteristic—her fierce blazing eyes—seems a contemptuous trouncing of *Cats*'s undisputed star—those two yellow pupils on the poster.

Adaptation is an art and, in the theater, it's *the* art—the only one left. The theater today is a shaper of material, not a maker of it, and, for Andrew Lloyd Webber, Deborah Warner, and all points in between, the key to success is finding an adaptable “property.” That's one reason why the theater rarely has anything new to say: it's usually saying something that's been said before somewhere else. As the idealistic young writer sings in Stephen Sondheim's *Merrily We Roll Along*, “I saw *My Fair Lady* . . . / I sort of enjoyed it,” which deftly skewers Sondheim's own ambivalence about the show: he admired it as a professional work of adaptation, but he couldn't see the *need* for it.

Besides, there aren't enough properties to provide gainful employment for all the producers, directors, playwrights, composers, and lyricists in town, and eventually most of them wind up knocking on the same door. At least half a dozen writers have mentioned to me that E. L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime* (1975) would make a good musical, but, by the time they got around to chasing them up, the rights had gone to the Toronto impresario Garth Drabinsky. For those who think the words “Toronto” and “impresario” are mutually exclusive, it should be said that Drabinsky's been represented on Broadway by *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and the recent revival of *Show Boat*, that he's currently rebuilding Chicago's historic Oriental Theater, and that, farther along 42nd Street from the Liberty, as one of the few plausible challengers to Disney's takeover, he's constructing a new 1,800-seat theater within the shell of the old Lyric and Apollo theaters. By comparison with the phalanxes of dullards above the title of most New York shows,

Drabinsky has the same entertainingly Napoleonic delusions as 42nd Street operators of the Golden Age—the David Belascos and Abe Erlangers. Arriving for *Ragtime*'s pre-Broadway world premiere at the Ford Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto, I presented my ticket and was informed, “You enter through Portal Six, sir.” Pardon me, which portal was that again? I'd been told that the theater had one of the best drama bookstores in North America, but, on investigation, it seemed mainly to be stocked with vast quantities of his somewhat premature autobiography.

Drabinsky chose *Ragtime* for his first brand-new homegrown musical because, he says, having revived *Show Boat*, he was in the mood for something equally epic. There aren't many epic musicals: even Oscar Hammerstein, having written *Show Boat*, which sprawls across the decades, said thereafter that the most adaptable stories are those whose action takes place within the briefest time. Hammerstein is correct, but limiting: you take a certain kind of story and turn it into a certain kind of show. That's one reason Broadway died. But, with the year 2000 approaching, it was inevitable that someone would start to look for a subject that says something—anything—about the century.

Doctorow's novel returns us to its dawn, though the title is not entirely musical: like a patchwork quilt, it's a collection of rags—bits and pieces, some fictional, some real—stitched into a whole. *Rags* might be a better name, if that hadn't already been used for a flop musical, also about the turn of the century, also about immigrants. On the page, *Ragtime* is a teeming tenement of curious facts, statistics, quirky anecdotes, centered around a family from New Rochelle, who cross paths with a Negro piano player, a Jewish immigrant, and dozens of figures from an age both turbulent and complacent—Stanford White, Henry Ford, Emma Goldman, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand . . . For a sense of just how crowded the book is, pluck a page at random. Here's a note on Harry Houdini:

His real name was Erich Weiss. He was passionately in love with his ancient mother whom he had installed in his brownstone home on West 113th Street. In fact Sigmund Freud had just arrived in America to give a series of lectures at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, and so Houdini was destined to be, with Al Jolson, the last of the great shameless mother lovers, a nineteenth-century movement that included such men as Poe, John Brown, Lincoln and James McNeill Whistler.

If you've got two and a half hours, a lot of that's got to go. When the film of *Ragtime* appeared, not long after the novel, practically everything had gone: what was left of the quilt was one strand, the story of the black pianist, Coalhouse Walker. Doctorow never liked the movie, and has kept a much tighter control on the stage version, approving the director and librettist and auditioning teams of composers and lyricists. Eventually, he and Drabinsky settled, for the score, on Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens and, for the book, on Terrence McNally, the last extant Broadway playwright (he won successive Tonys for *Love! Valour! Compassion!* and *Master Class*), and now poised to sew up what's left of the libretto business. As director, they chose Steppenwolf's Frank Galati, mainly on the grounds of his experience in staging novels (*The Grapes of Wrath*), and, as choreographer and insurance (Galati's never done a big musical before), Graciela Daniele.

Doctorow has been supplying his adapters with copious notes, and seems to be having a good time. But, though he may be happier, I'm not sure we should be. Of the stellar names in that paragraph above, only Houdini has managed to wriggle his way into the stage production. Even his mother's gone, and Freud, too—which means we lose the chapter where the old boy tours Coney Island and goes through the Tunnel of Love with Jung. There's more to his presence than entertainment value. The historical figures in Doctorow's novel not only foreshadow the preoccupations of

the century—psychoanalysis, technology, celebrity, race, sex—but also find echoes in his fictional creations: for example, for the immigrants who long to escape, there's Houdini, an immigrant who escapes again and again. With Freud gone, and Henry Ford reduced to one novelty number, the sense in the novel of great individuals destabilizing the course of history for thousands of lesser souls is diminished.

There's another drawback. Once you start hacking away at the vast tide of characters who swarm through *Ragtime*, you expose the structural contrivances. Musical comedy, of course, is famously contrived. In *Lady, Be Good!*, the four warring couples are conveniently reconciled by eleven o'clock and, to the tune of "Fascinating Rhythm," settle on quadruple nuptials:

FIRST COUPLE:

Fascinating wedding
That sure appeals to me
Fascinating wedding
I hear you calling

SECOND COUPLE:

Why not make it double?
Please say that you agree
Saves a lot of trouble
And sounds enthralling . . .

But, deep at its core, Doctorow's novel is plotted with the same neatness: of the three families he introduces us to, one is white, one is Negro, and one is immigrant, and on the last page, like that "Fascinating Wedding," he finds a way to bring them together. It's just that, when you're reading the book and they're submerged within a great sea of humanity, it doesn't *seem* so symbolically tidy. That's the danger with this sort of exercise: the more expert you get at adaptation, the more everything you do winds up looking like an adaptation.

For those who manage to make it through to the final cut, there's also a price to be paid. At a political rally, one character, a young black servant, tries to attract the at-

tention of the vice president. The Secret Service boys, assuming she's an assassin, thump her in the chest and jump on her. She's held at the police station overnight, until it occurs to the local sergeant that maybe she ought to see a doctor. So she's transferred to a hospital and discovered to be coughing blood. By the following day, pneumonia's set in. By the end of the week, she's dead. On stage, this is all telescoped into fifteen seconds: she tries to attract the attention of the vice president, the Secret Service agents club her to death, her lover cradles her lifeless body and starts singing soulfully about it. Well, we've saved time. But, in this absurd compression, something has been lost along the way. Instead of a grim but typical combination of official zeal followed by bureaucratic indifference, we have an untypical, unlikely explosion of rage.

The episode has been simplified and coarsened, and, if it's the position of Galati and McNally that that's the only way it can be done on stage, then they're conceding the fundamental immaturity of their chosen form. Besides, musicals are only controversial about things we already agree on: at a *Sound of Music* production meeting, someone wondered whether that show wasn't too "controversial"; "You mean," said Richard Rodgers, "it might offend people who like Nazis?" Similarly, the stage *Ragtime*'s line—that racism is a bad thing—seems tired and old hat, particularly when set to ersatz-gospel yearning and particularly when measured against the novel's much more dispassionate view of all its characters—black murderers, middle-class anarchists, Jewish socialists.

But that overheated compression of the young girl's death reflects the biggest change between the novel and the stage version: the tone. Doctorow's book is written with a kind of journalistic detachment, whereas in musicals, as he sees it, people are always singing about their feelings. That's certainly true these days, though one could argue that in contemporary America everyone sings about his feelings, on daytime talk

shows, on radio call-ins, all the time. But, until fairly recently, most Broadway writers felt strongly that songs should *reveal* feelings, not discuss them. At its best, this discipline pushed composers and lyricists to find new ways into each character and situation. In *Guys and Dolls*, Frank Loesser has a stripper who catches cold—not an uncommon occurrence, except, as it's the chronically affianced Miss Adelaide, she naturally sees it as psychosomatic: "From a lack of community property and a feeling she's getting too old/ A person can develop a cold." In *Ragtime*, by contrast, ten minutes into the play, bidding farewell to her husband as he leaves on an expedition for the Pole, Mother sings:

Tell me
What of the people
Whose boundaries chafe
Who marry so bravely
And end up so safe?
Tell me how to be someone
Whose heart can explore
While still saying here . . .

This displays too acute and too literate a sense of her predicament too early on—especially when set to its overwrought Sondheimesque music. In the novel, Mother and Father are shy with each other and ashamed of their sexual needs: there are all kinds of things that cannot be articulated, cannot be expressed. Mother, like many women of the time, accepted her lot, and even those who didn't were disinclined to sit around all day analyzing *why* they didn't. On stage, Marin Mazzie (Mother) and Mark Jacoby (Father) act and move as a somewhat stiff-necked, diffidently tender middle-class couple of the time. Whenever she opens her mouth to sing, though, a different and decidedly contemporary sensibility takes over:

There was a time,
Our happiness seemed never-ending
I was so sure
That where we were heading was right

Life was a road
So certain and straight and unbending . . .

(Straight *and* unbending?)

Doctorow's novel is vivid because it's written in the voice of its time. It's not so narrow-minded as to foist the world view from 1975 on characters from seventy years earlier. On stage, this quality is diluted; it's not merely the predictable twitchiness—the frequent, anachronistic references to “people of color”—but a more general loss of time and place in the lyrics, which illustrates a very good rule: when people sing about their feelings (as Doctorow puts it), it's because they haven't been given the right material to sing about. If you'd wanted to retain the novel's cool, journalistic, observational quality, you could have come up with a score like *Cabaret* or *Chicago*, both of which use ostensibly innocent song forms to comment ironically, and sometimes savagely, on the action. But that would have required proper, inventive song titles, and titles is something Flaherty and Ahrens are absolutely hopeless at. A song about Henry Ford is called “Henry Ford,” a song about the night Goldman spoke at Union Square is called “The Night Goldman Spoke at Union Square,” a song about the crime of the century is called “The Crime of the Century.” This last song is delivered by Evelyn Nesbit, testifying in the trial of her husband, the railroad magnate Harry K. Thaw, for the murder of her lover, the architect Stanford White. The real Miss Nesbit appeared in a few shows round the turn of the century—such as *Tommy Rot* (1902), which included the number “Every Dog Must Have His Day and Every Puss Her Afternoon.” I've never heard the song, and I expect there are good reasons why, but the title alone suggests that the authors of *Tommy Rot* were working a little harder than Flaherty and Ahrens. If you don't have a title, you've nothing to resolve, you've no lyric thrust: you wind up singing feelings. It's typical of the show's musical confusion that “The Crime of the Century” is a court case presented as vaudeville. It's not just

that that's currently being done far more adroitly at *Chicago*, but that there it's a unifying device for the entire score. In *Ragtime*, it's just one of several approaches picked up for a few minutes and then cast aside. That really is a disservice to the novel.

There's much to admire here: Eugene Lee's sets deploy boats, planes, trains, and automobiles to conjure the energy of the age; Galati and Daniele's stage pictures pick up on and develop lines from the book. For example, during the opening number, the chorus, elegant in Edwardian whites and creams, suddenly snarls, “There were no Negroes” and “There were no immigrants” and, on their respective lines, a Negro chorus, ablaze in color, and an immigrant chorus, in shabby grey, enter. Enlarging the little book of silhouettes the artisan Tateh makes for his young daughter, a vast multitude of European immigrants parades by upstage, in silhouette. But what's disgraceful is that, for a book as musical as this, *Ragtime* has no score—just disconnected songs. As Doctorow puts it, ragtime is a “sweet paradox”—a very formal, controlled, almost courtly music, but with that unmistakably American syncopation. Because Scott Joplin could only land jobs in saloons and whorehouses, it was seen as a low, vernacular form. In fact, it can be stately, dignified, melancholy, elegiac, sinister, sensuous—just like Doctorow's novel, a great American fugue. You could certainly write a score in ragtime—as Sondheim wrote an eternally waltzing triple-time score for *A Little Night Music*. Or you could write the “public” songs—for Henry Ford, Houdini and co.—in the Tin Pan Alley forms of the day, and use ragtime for the soliloquies, for the expressions of deeper feelings, for the liberation of the characters. Or you could do a dozen other things which wouldn't so willfully ignore and ultimately betray the show's title. As Ira Gershwin used to say: “A title/ Is vital/ Once *you've* it/ Prove it.” This show has a great title, but it doesn't prove it. And somewhere between now and the Broadway opening they need to figure out a way.

Picasso: from “Les Demoiselles” to “Parade”

by Karen Wilkin

The most remarkable thing about writing on Picasso, John Richardson observed at a recent panel discussion on artists' biographies, was that no matter what you said about him, the opposite was also true. The list of contradictions that emerges from Richardson's writings on the artist seems nearly endless. No less mercurial in life than on canvas, the painter could be tender and brutal, forthright and devious, charming and horrifying, trivial and astonishing. Picasso could be a daredevil and a coward, a loyal friend and an appallingly indifferent one, a playful companion and a cruel one. He seems to have delighted in sheer contrariness, even obfuscation, assuring one questioner that a painting was definitely vertical and another that it was no less definitely horizontal. Even Picasso's most frequently quoted, apparently definitive aphorisms turn out to be questionable. He once told Richardson that he could never remember whether he had said “I don't seek, I find” or “I don't find, I seek,” adding that it didn't make much difference either way.

The same contradictions obtain in *A Life of Picasso. Volume II: 1907–1917, The Painter of Modern Life*,¹ the second volume of the ambitious four-part biography projected by

Richardson and his indefatigable collaborator, Marilyn McCully. Volume 2 is informative and obvious, enlightening and irritating, perceptive and obtuse, penetrating and superficial. I had found Richardson's first volume, the examination of Picasso's childhood and youth, *A Life of Picasso: 1881–1906*, perfectly wonderful when it appeared five years ago. It was exciting to have, at last, an exhaustive catalogue of who was who among the various permutations of “the Picasso gang,” who did what, to whom, when, and (in light of informed speculation) why. The meticulously presented evidence exploded, for example, the myth of Picasso's precocious virtuosity; his earliest drawings suggest that far from having “received” his ability to draw, as though it were the legacy of a fairy godmother, the talented young Spaniard achieved his incisive draughtsmanship through application and study. The background and aftermath of such pivotal events as the suicide of Picasso's friend Casegemas were itemized and clarified. And more.

A truly dazzling amount of information was presented effortlessly, although it was clear that it was the result not only of formidable research, but of close scrutiny of Picasso's paintings, drawings, and notations. Richardson largely read Picasso's art, it seemed, for what it revealed about the personality of its maker and for corroboration of information gleaned from other research. He seemed to examine images, no

¹ *A Life of Picasso. Volume II: 1907–1917, The Painter of Modern Life*, by John Richardson, with the collaboration of Marilyn McCully; Random House, 500 pages, \$55.

less than documents, for clues to the artist's friendships, both casual and passionate, to his travels, his tastes, his aspirations, how he spent his time. But Richardson was the ideal informed observer, uniquely fitted to recognize such clues, since during the years that he and Douglas Cooper were Picasso's neighbors in the South of France, he had gotten to know not only Picasso fairly well, but many of the artist's colleagues, friends, and female companions. In addition, Richardson had interviewed a good number of these invaluable firsthand sources.

What emerged from this carefully traced history of Picasso's early years was a vivid portrait of a not very likable but unforgettable young man, one who was stubborn, deeply superstitious, rather childish, with an extra helping of misogynist machismo—admittedly, standard equipment for a late nineteenth-century Andalusian male—and possessed, as well, of a truly monstrous self-absorption. (Those characteristics never seemed to have changed, and Richardson's contention notwithstanding, they do not seem to have had any redeeming opposite numbers in the Picasso he describes in either of the two volumes.)

Since volume 1 ended just before Picasso began to work on that supreme icon of modernism *Les Femmes d'Alger*, it was as tantalizing as any cliffhanger serial. Volume 2 was eagerly awaited, not just because Richardson had set such a high standard in his first book, but because his second was to deal with what most of us regard as Picasso's most significant years as a painter, the extraordinary decade that began with *Les Femmes d'Alger* and ended with *Parade*—the decade, in other words, in which what we now call Cubism was created by Picasso and his “pard” Georges Braque, when collage was invented, and when the improvisations of the early years of Analytic Cubism were solidified into the firmly interlocked planes of Synthetic Cubism. Yet when I finally plunged into volume 2, I found that though most of my expectations were fulfilled, I was also somewhat disappointed.

Volume 2 shares many of the virtues of volume 1, but where the first installment of this massive undertaking seemed all but definitive—yes, I know there is no such thing, each biography necessarily revealing as much about its author as its subject—Richardson's study of the glory years of Cubism seems more problematic. In part, I suppose, this is because the nuances of the period between 1907 and 1917 in Paris are far more familiar than those of Picasso's formative years in Spain. The cast of characters, even the walk-ons, includes some of the most celebrated, thoroughly studied names in modernism: Braque, Guillaume Apollinaire, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, Juan Gris, Henri Rousseau, Jean Cocteau, Max Jacob, and more. The documentary sources, such as Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the memoirs of Picasso's mistress “la belle Fernande” Olivier, or Dora Vallier's interviews with Braque, are far from obscure. The anecdotes are famous, even legendary.

Also, the art of this crucial decade is not only generally well represented in American museums, but in the past decade it has been the subject of a series of sharply focused exhibitions in the U.S., perhaps most notably the exemplary “Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism” at the Museum of Modern Art. Such familiarity doesn't exactly breed contempt, but it makes for more critical reading and lessens the impact of Richardson's “revelations.” It's arguable, for example, that the opportunity to see paintings by Picasso and Braque done more or less at the same time, often in the same place, hanging side by side in “Pioneering Cubism” did more to clarify the artists' relationship during this tumultuous period than any of Richardson's carefully presented facts and sequences.

Nonetheless, just as with volume 1, the strength of volume 2 lies in its wealth of specific information and its intimate details. Richardson is an omniscient narrator and an inspired—and well-informed—gossip. His speedy sentences and impatient tone, which ranges from acerbic to bitchy, make even

the most plodding list of factual material seem racy and believable. He fleshes out personalities and decodes Picasso's far from straightforward relationships with everyone from intimates such as Braque and the celebrated parade of women, to important but slightly distanced characters such as dealers and collectors, to peripheral figures such as Honoré-Joseph G  ry Pieret, Apollinaire's disreputable (and larcenous) "secretary." When Richardson is at his best, he presents us with alternative versions and views of famous events, filtered through his own considerable experience of the players. He points out discrepancies, suggests plausible motives for diverging narratives, and—most of the time—offers what seem to be absolutely convincing versions of what must have really happened.

In much of the first part of the book, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* acts as a kind of link between an extraordinarily diverse array of characters and events, as Richardson happily goes off on a staggering number of tangents that serve not simply to fill in gaps, but to round out our sense of what bohemia in pre-World War I Paris was like. Some of these informative digressions cover familiar ground; others deal with arcane minutiae. Some are directly related to the conception, execution, and reception of *Les Demoiselles*; others are only tenuously connected. But most of the information, even when it is not exactly news, is absorbing and Richardson eventually demonstrates the relevance of even his most discursive asides, such as the chapter devoted to unraveling "*l'affaire des statuettes*."

The phrase refers to a rather unsavory sequence of events of 1911, the mess surrounding the theft of a couple of Iberian heads from the Louvre by Apollinaire's questionable employee, Pieret. Richardson gives us the whole episode in all its comic and distasteful details: Pieret's supposedly unpremeditated, spontaneous stealing of the heads (obviously planned in advance), Picasso's buying them from him (claiming he had no idea of their origins), and all the

rest of it. When the Mona Lisa disappeared from the Louvre soon after, Pieret's narcissistic boasting—in a letter published in a newspaper whose art critic was on bad terms with Apollinaire—led the baffled police, whose reasoning seems to have been worthy of Inspector Clouseau, to arrest Apollinaire and question Picasso. It all comes vividly to life, from Picasso's panic to his unsuccessful attempt to chuck the Iberian heads into the Seine to his denial of his old friend Apollinaire—who apparently behaved no more admirably with the police. Richardson makes some attempt to justify Picasso's actions, noting that the young painter generally distrusted authority and specifically feared being sent back to Spain, but in the end, the biographer simply allows his subject to look foolish and fearful.

The significance of the Iberian heads, however, and the strength of Picasso's desire to possess them—in a metaphysical as well as literal sense—become clear as Richardson expands his discussion of the evolution of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* to address the vexed issue of Picasso's connection to African art, which provokes yet another provocative excursus. Especially after the 1920s, the painter usually downplayed the influence of African art on *Les Demoiselles*, despite the seemingly undeniable evidence of the masklike heads of the figures on the right. Instead, he stressed the importance of Iberian sculpture to his work, claiming that he didn't "discover" tribal sculpture until after painting the picture, and on at least one occasion, insisting that he had never heard of *art n  gre*.

Richardson not only tracks the dates of Picasso's various repudiations of the role of African art in his work, but offers convincing explanations for them. He reminds us of Picasso's general love of secrecy, his habit of covering his tracks, his willingness to bend the truth. Richardson points out the role of ego in Picasso's stance. While Iberian sculpture was very much his own discovery, Picasso was not the first painter of his circle to be interested in *art n  gre*; Vlaminck had been collecting African art since 1904 and

Matisse had certainly shown Picasso a piece from his collection months before he began work on *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Nor had Picasso made his first visit to the Trocadéro "on a whim," as he later claimed; Derain had suggested that he look at the African art in the museum. Political considerations, Richardson notes, might also have provoked Picasso's later denials. In the 1930s, when he was acclaimed as the painter of *Guernica*, hailed as a champion of Republican Spain, and appointed director (in absentia) of the Prado, Picasso had practical reasons for stressing the Spanish inspiration of his celebrated painting. And since Franco's African troops were notorious for atrocities committed during the Spanish Civil War, Picasso could very well have wished to separate himself from any associations with Africa.

Richardson excels at turning the renowned figures of this period into three-dimensional, memorable personalities. Braque and his wife, Marcelle, emerge as distinct individuals whose level-headed, articulate observations often serve as welcome correctives to received opinion, although it's worth remembering that since Richardson knew them only long after the period in question, their versions of events are colored by years of reflection and, possibly, reinvention.

Richardson's treatment of Picasso's relations with women is harder to accept. Fernande Olivier, who shared the artist's life from about 1904 to 1912, emerges as intelligent and self-possessed. In Richardson's account of the couple's last years together, however, she seems self-indulgent and rather indolent, while Picasso himself appears peevish and unsympathetic, yet the writer clearly seems to take Picasso's side. He notes, for example, after quoting a letter in which Fernande complains to Gertrude Stein of being ill with painful kidney disease, while living in primitive conditions in a remote Spanish town with an increasingly detached Picasso, that the young woman's fears about being pregnant were simply a plea for sympathy.

Picasso seems to have acted badly in the later stages of all of his romantic connections (and some of the earlier stages, as well, given Richardson's stories about his abducting women who took his fancy), and while the biographer acknowledges the artist's unappetizing behavior, he seems remarkably tolerant of his lapses. Richardson describes, for example, Picasso's cold-heartedly weighing the relative merits of various candidates to replace his mistress Eva Gouel, when she was dying of cancer, observing that the painter "liked to shock people" by saying that he should have left Eva with her former lover, the painter Marcoussis, so that *he* would have had to foot the medical bills. "Once again," Richardson says, "Picasso's misogyny comes across as a macho pretense, a typically Andalusian device to conceal his very unmacho compassion." Maybe.

At the panel on artists' biographies, Richardson declared his belief that all objections to Picasso's treatment of the women in his life were part of a feminist conspiracy spearheaded by Arianna Stassinopoulos-Huffington. (The notion of Ms. Stassinopoulos-Huffington as a feminist drew audible snorts from the critic Linda Nochlin in the audience.) Besides, Richardson said loftily, he couldn't see why we should judge Picasso by today's standards, given the mores of his generation and background. It's hard to tell from volume 2 whether Richardson believes that his conception of Picasso as embodying all oppositions solves the problem or whether he subscribes to the "tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner" school of biography. But it's perhaps significant that when trying to make a case for Picasso as a pacifist during the First World War, Richardson again falls back on the "that's how Andalusians behave" defense, citing, oddly, a study by David Gilmore entitled *Aggression and Community: Paradoxes of Andalusian Culture* (Yale University Press, 1987). The artist's pacifism is evidenced by his incorporating in one of his *papier collés* a newspaper article about a huge demonstration against the

Balkan war held in November 1912 in a suburb of Paris. What's disturbing is that Richardson implies that no matter how egregious Picasso's behavior toward women, it should be condoned because it fed his work. As Richardson writes in an uncharacteristically turgid passage:

Unless he had emotional as well as physical possession of a woman, Picasso could not internalize her image; and embark on the physiognomical analysis, pictorial lovemaking, let alone the fiendish manipulation—deification followed by a degrading process of psychosexual dissection—which endow the portraits of his wife, Olga, or Marie-Thérèse Walter or Dora Maar with such wrenching intensity.

The most acute problems of volume 2 have to do with Richardson's approach to Picasso's art. Not only is there the tacit assumption that everything the artist did is worth paying attention to, but for all his insistence on the ambiguity of Picasso's meanings, the biographer seems curiously literal-minded when he looks at pictures. As in volume 1, Richardson interrogates paintings and drawings chiefly for what they reveal to him about his subject's life. While this seemed generally acceptable in relation to Picasso's early work, given its usually limited formal ambitions and obvious emphasis on narrative, it is disturbing in relation to his inventive, innovative pictures of the Cubist period. Richardson frequently alludes to the recurrent formal ambiguities in Picasso's works after 1907; he discusses at length images in which figures are conceived as simultaneously reclining and standing or as confections of back and front views, but while such spatial complexities fascinate him, he rejects the possibility of complexities of meaning. He is quite dogmatic about what gatherings of planes refer to, what fragments of drawing depict, in even the most unstable of Cubist pictures.

Richardson appears to believe that the visual puns, jokes, and playful shorthand images that flicker through so many of Picasso's Cubist works are the most impor-

tant elements of these pictures; the word "mocking," in fact, recurs throughout the text to describe Picasso's intentions in a particular image—with no mention of any other possible impetus. Doubtless these specific references are there. Throughout his long life as a painter, throughout his restless reinvention of manner, Picasso remained primarily a depicter, a renderer of images as if they were real, solid three-dimensional presences—even if they were imaginary.

There are exceptional pictures, of course, such as the superb, subtly inflected *Bread and Fruit Dish on a Table* (1909, Basel Kunstmuseum), but most of the time, Picasso seems fairly indifferent to the material qualities of paint, preferring to use his medium simply as a means of rendering an image, rather than exploring the double life of paint as paint *and* as allusion. (Even Richardson acknowledges that when Picasso *did* make tentative forays into surface variation or into subsuming "figures" into "grounds," he was following the lead of Braque and Matisse.) But if all Picasso was doing in his art was encoding elaborate private messages or disguising recognizable references to specific people, as Richardson implies, we probably wouldn't be interested in his work for very long.

The weaknesses of the discussions in volume 2 of individual works are compensated for by the rich supporting material, mined by the tireless McCully from a daunting number of critical and historical sources. And if Richardson seems willing to accept uncritically just about anything Picasso made, he is more exacting when it comes to broader evaluations. He is good at sorting out Picasso and Braque from the "Salon Cubists" and lesser lights, such as Derain, and evokes the perceived hierarchy of the period well as he tracks the professional and personal connections, resentments, alliances, and machinations of his enormous cast of characters. But just when you are thoroughly caught up in Richardson's entertaining, gossipy narrative—say, the chapter on Picasso's not very successful liaison with the "enchanted but maddening

allumense” Irène Lagut, which overlapped his marriage to Olga Khokhlova and was the source of an Apollinaire novel—you are stopped in your tracks by a discussion of the underlying Cubist images revealed by x-rays of a Neo-Classical portrait of Olga from 1923. Richardson thinks the concealed picture may have been of Irène, explaining that since she walked out on Picasso, the painter “may well have felt like hiding the mess of his wartime amours under a thick coat of white paint embellished with a *comme il faut* image of his wife.” Even allowing for Picasso’s deeply ingrained superstitions, his evident belief in the role of the artist as shaman, and his taste for sympathetic magic, this seems excessively literal.

The subtitle of volume 2, *The Painter of Modern Life*, is also problematic. It’s difficult to believe that, as Richardson implies, Picasso—especially in the decade between 1907 and 1917—identified with the charming, lightweight nineteenth-century illustrator Constantin Guys, the “Monsieur G.” of Baudelaire’s celebrated essay. Surely what was modern in 1863, when Baudelaire published his tribute to Guys, must have seemed hopelessly out of date to a vigorous, ambitious young iconoclast in the first years of the twentieth century. If Richardson means by “modern life” the iconography of Cubism, the phrase is even more inappropriate, since what was radically modern about Picasso’s and Braque’s art of the Teens was not its subject matter, but its forms. Still lifes and landscapes, even still lifes of café tabletops and landscapes with factory buildings, had long since become respectable; not since the Salon of 1859 had anyone been seriously troubled by the erosion of academic standards that deemed history painting—narrative scenes of large-scale figures—to be superior to anything else.

The paradox that makes Richardson’s subtitle even more puzzling, of course, is that Picasso himself seems to have retained this prejudice even in the years when he was apparently most indifferent to the legacy of traditional painting. *Les Demoiselles d’Avi-*

gnon, for all its continuing power to shock, is in many ways a very traditional painting. The subject is essentially academic: a group of large nudes in a neutral setting. It retains its ability to startle not because it depicts “modern life,” but because of its disjunctions, its uncomfortable welding of the classical and the tribal. The very recognizability of *Les Demoiselles*’s links with classical prototypes is what makes Picasso’s transformations of curves into angles, convexities into concavities so disturbing.

The larger question raised by Richardson’s monumental enterprise is that of the necessity of the artist’s biography itself. Aesthetic experience, after all, which depends on direct confrontation with works of art, has nothing to do with the kind of book Richardson and McCully have written. But it is easier if more labor-intensive, to assemble facts, anecdotes, and documented statements than to try to find equivalents for wordless encounters with paintings and sculptures. How much do we need to know? Biography is useful, Richardson maintained at the panel, if it illuminates the art. And there is no question that for *his* chosen subject, at least, biography is a real issue in the understanding of Picasso’s work, as it is for very few other artists. (In the long run, the story of Picasso’s life may even turn out to be more interesting than his work, if you take into account the whole trajectory of his career, but that’s another matter.)

It’s not just that Picasso embodies the popular notion of the modern artist as professional bad boy, although he amply fills the bill. The details of his life are visible in his art. The observation that whenever the woman in Picasso’s life changed, everything changed—the place he lived, his studio, and above all, his way of painting—is something of a cliché and an oversimplification, but no less true. At times, Picasso seems to have inhabited his work, like a child who imagines himself flying the airplane that he draws, so that the picture becomes a parallel universe that can be penetrated by the imagination; at other

times, he seems to have possessed his chosen subject matter by making an image of it, as though depiction gave power over the thing depicted. There's little doubt that Picasso's art is deeply informed by the events of his life, although obviously, the degree of revelation (or disguise) of the actual is not what determines the success of a picture. At best, Picasso's profoundly autobiographical allusions translate into equally profound formal inventions, the products of a fecund visual imagination; at worst, those formal imperatives degenerate into mannerism. Richardson's excellent evocation of personalities, events, and connections can't help you make aesthetic distinctions, but it can make the pictures more legible.

The second volume of Richardson's prodigiously detailed biography deals with an

extraordinary period in Picasso's evolution, a decade when his work seems no less personal, but more inventive and freer of self-indulgence, than at any other time in his long career. Was it because of the subtle pressure exerted by his close connection with Braque in those years? Richardson's speculations on the subtly shifting relationship between the two master painters suggest provocative, but not authoritative answers to this absorbing question. Of course, something similar occurred in the late 1920s when Picasso worked closely with his compatriot Julio González to make a remarkable series of constructed metal sculptures. I suppose we'll just have to wait for volume 3 to find out more about that. Whatever my reservations about volume 2, I'm still looking forward to the next.

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The media

Triangulating & mau-mauing

by James Bowman

During the recent presidential election campaign, we were invited by sophisticates in the media to admire the skill with which President Clinton engineered his own reelection (with the help of Dick Morris) by means of what was called "triangulation." This meant that the President created his own political middle ground by a rhetorical strategy of distancing himself from many of his supporters in Congress, and from such traditional liberal Democratic issues as Federal welfare guarantees, while at the same time characterizing his Republican opponents as "extremists." Thus the man at the very center of American politics was able to represent himself as being, in some important sense, above politics, and a moderating influence on both sides in an atmosphere of, as people (or at least the press) had become persuaded, "incivility" and bitter partisanship.

Naturally, such a strategy depended absolutely on the cooperation of the media, which was obtained partly by their natural wish to elect a Democratic president but partly also by the clever exploitation of three of the most entrenched myths that the American media culture has for years assiduously promoted. These are that the social programs, if not the broader political views, of traditionalist liberal Democrats have in some degree been discredited; that the Gingrich Republicans are dangerously "extreme" in their views; and that the most serious problem facing the Federal govern-

ment is "gridlock" and strongly held partisan positions. Each of these myths is based on some more subtle truth, but its own truth or lack of it matters little compared with its usefulness as a political tool.

For there is a more general sense in which "triangulation" is a strategy that can work for anyone with a knowledge of the media culture and the will to exploit it. As in its Clintonian form, this strategy requires the construction of some straw man whom the press will never tire of kicking and pummeling. During the campaign, the caricature version of the "extremist" Newt Gingrich worked so well in this part that the media went right on savaging him even after he was so politically weakened as to be a toothless bogeyman. Nothing short of political destruction would satisfy them. For most of December and January—a period during which substantively much more serious evidence of wrongdoing on the part of the White House and the Democratic National Committee was coming to light—the networks and big newspapers were completely preoccupied with a laughably trivial "ethics" violation on the part of Mr. Gingrich. It was a furor which the Speaker's own incautious admission of wrongdoing increased immeasurably, as such candor always does. A good political rule of thumb is never to confess to anything unless it is part of a resignation—or plea bargain—package. It is certainly a rule that Clinton lives by.

While all this was going on, however, another straw man was being put together and another triangulation campaign was taking place in the media, even though the beneficiaries of it remained at first invisible. It all started just before Christmas when the news broke that the Oakland, California, school board had voted to recognize as an alternative “language,” possibly for purposes of obtaining funding for bilingual teaching, the black street argot spoken by something over a half of the pupils in the educational district. This language they called “Ebonics,” a word deriving from combining “ebony” with “phonics” and invented in 1973 by Robert Williams, a professor of psychology at Washington University in St. Louis. His book *Ebonics: The True Language of Black Folks* was published in 1975 and, as Jacob Heilbrunn pointed out in *The New Republic* of January 20, has been slowly gaining influence over the educational establishment for twenty years:

Ebonics is not just a bit of amateur crackpotism. It is professional crackpotism, well within the pedagogical mainstream. And Ebonics was not schemed up by a few opportunistic, marginal pols in a desperately poor city but stems from decades of scholarship conducted at America’s most distinguished universities. The Oakland School District can point to a rich corpus of academic work on which to base its decision.

As long ago as 1979, a Federal judge ordered the school board of Ann Arbor, Michigan, to provide instruction in Ebonics, which some of its academic proponents had convinced him was a legitimate creole. Such events have a way of getting lost to the public consciousness in the general racial turmoil, until the culture as a whole is disposed to devote its full attention to them—something which finally happened with the resolution of the Oakland school board. Perhaps because of a growing sense of social fragmentation and an inability, now, to consider such things merely as fringe goings-on, the resolution was a bombshell

to the white media, from which the outcry of commentators from across the political spectrum was immediate and vociferous. The first two points of the triangle were almost instantly in place, both more or less equally mythical: the mad or wicked promoters of Ebonics and the doughty champions of the English language. Let us consider them one at a time.

The original resolution of the Oakland school board was most probably an exercise in what Tom Wolfe called three decades ago “mau-mauing”—that is, being outrageous by behaving according to (or against, whichever is more outrageous) black stereotypes in order to get whitey’s attention. Ebonics has now shown itself to be almost in the same class as Farrakhanian anti-Semitism—and even better than the inflammatory teachings of Leonard Jeffries of City College in New York (a comparison noticed by Brent Staples in *The New York Times*)—as a sure-fire way to get a rise out of the media culture, and hence out of the white power structure. This is always worth doing, not only for its own sake but also to move the racial argument in a particular direction and increase the power of the mau-mauing black leaders. These are the guys that whitey notices and talks to—because they shock or scare or anger him so much.

Of course, the racial sensitivities of the enlightened media act as a kind of filter which today’s mau-mauer may find it difficult to penetrate. Not many people ever hear, for instance, of Louis Farrakhan’s lunatic fantasies of being taken up into a space ship and conversing with the dead, though Farrakhan makes no secret of them. It would be neither sensitive nor enlightened to allow this “leader” to become a mere laughingstock. So, too, in their first reports of the Oakland school board resolution, neither Peter Applebome in *The New York Times* nor Rene Sanchez in *The Washington Post* mentioned the most lurid—and ridiculous of its claims—namely that Ebonics is something “genetically based and not a dialect of English.” Michelle Locke wrote in

The Washington Post two days later that “some have questioned a paragraph in the resolution referring to ‘African Language Systems’ as being ‘genetically based and not a dialect of English,’” but she explains that the board had “used ‘genetically’ to refer to historic and cultural, not biological factors.” Presumably, the word “genetically” in Ebonics means something different from what it does in English.

In all the controversy, Jesse Jackson played a familiar role. At first this inveterate triangulator, who has always thrived on conciliating and holding at bay for the benefit of the commonweal all manner of racial extremists, seemed to have missed the significance of the bogus debate over Ebonics and actually spoke candidly and truthfully in dismissing it: “I understand the attempt to reach out to these children, but this is an unacceptable surrender borderlining on disgrace . . . It’s teaching down to our children and it must never happen,” he said on “Meet the Press.” Perhaps he was ill or preoccupied in some way. At any rate, he soon got with the program. A few days later, Reuters reported that he was “re-thinking” his “initial criticism” of the Oakland plan and had announced that he was to meet with the Oakland school board and other officials in an attempt to help them “in their quest for some form of compensatory education” (his words).

Two days after that, Jackson gave the following explanation to the Reuters reporter as to why the Oakland school board had been misunderstood: “They’re not trying to teach black English as a standard language,” he said. “They’re looking for tools to teach children standard English so they might be competitive.” It was another example, I suppose, of *faux* Ebonic *amis* that the original resolution had stated quite unequivocally that they *were* trying to teach black English as a standard language. Likewise, initial reports had made it clear that the Oakland school authorities had their sights set on more Federal money, though a later clarification denied this. One Darolyn [*sic*] Davis, identified as “a spokes-

woman for the Oakland Unified School District,” told the press that

the school district has never, and did not intend to, go after Federal funds, bilingual funding . . . The goal and the intent of the district’s policy are to insure that every child in Oakland speaks, writes and comprehends standard American English. It would be a crime, it really would be a crime to not teach students standard American English.

By this time, some in the white media were beginning to notice that the original mau-mauers were not keeping their end of the argument up, and by mid-January the Oakland school board had made a strategic retreat, changing its resolution so as to call for only “recognition of language differences.” Already, Louis Menand in *The New Yorker* had noted that when the rapper Chuck D and William Bennett “are of one mind on an issue, it is safe to assume that consensus has been reached.” Likewise, Frank Rich wrote in *The New York Times* that “there’s something bizarre about the burning ebonics debate: for all the smoke and noise, it isn’t really a debate at all. Almost everyone has the same opinion”—that is, against teaching in Ebonics. Puzzling, isn’t it? But this does not mean that the debate is not about something. It is, at the least, an opportunity for progressive-minded people of reason and moderation (of which, of course, the white press is chock full) to note what the debate is “really” about. And what it is really about is the need of black (and other poor) school districts for more money. Frank Rich went on to cite the opinion of Ms. Gwen Ifill that “Ebonics has become an overpowering metaphor, an almost irrelevant side issue, that displaces any serious discussion about ‘what’s happening with underachieving students.’”

This is precisely right. But neither the perspicacious Mr. Rich, nor Ms. Ifill, nor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., whom he also cites in his support, ever get round to telling us what *is* happening with underachieving stu-

dents—beyond the fact that they are being starved of attention or “resources.” The point for such commentators was not and never has been to investigate the actual use to which existing resources are put, or even to propose new uses for the additional resources they are reliably in favor of, but (as is generally the case in the *bien pensant* media) to congratulate themselves for their compassion—and their perspicacity in identifying this as the “real” issue.

For in this kind of triangulation, or journalistic dialectic, those who leap into print with antitheses for any sort of mau-mauing thesis, are generally also carrying with them—so as to be able to produce it triumphantly in the final couple of graphs—a synthesis. It may be a predictable synthesis, but at least it does not put them on the wrong side of a progressive issue. Mary McGrory in *The Washington Post*, for example, after roundly condemning the Oakland school board as “kooky, even for California,” went on to write that “it would be too bad if both sides just keep screaming at each other, the school board feeling sorry for itself and its critics pounding it.” The board, she thinks was, effectively saying “they don’t know what to do” and that “they need help.” Well done, Mary! You’ve passed your exam and said exactly what you were intended to say.

In the same day’s *Post*, William Raspberry, in his second column on the subject, also showed that he had got the point. “If the idea of the whole Ebonics affair is (as Jesse Jackson now seems to believe) to get academically challenged children into smaller classrooms with superior (or, at any rate, better trained) teachers, doesn’t it make sense to seek those things directly?” Well, yes, but it’s not so easy to get people’s attention that way, and call up from their slumbers the voices of reason and moderation, whose estimable contributions had been implicit in the controversy from the start.

So who was doing this skillful triangulating? *Cui bono*? By now it should be clear

enough that it was the public education establishment. Typically, *The Washington Times* was much sharper than the rest of the fuzzy liberal press about this:

They [the Oakland school board] are less interested in promoting ethnic pride and facilitating language skills than they are eager to grab federal swag . . . Nor is Ebonics the only recent instance of federal education policy run amok. The recent rash of “sexual harassment” in the nation’s elementary schools—a phenomenon also blamed on crazed political correctness—is also the result of Washington’s ideological interference with local education. Hand in hand with the more radical cells of the feminist front and with the ambulance chasers in the plaintiff’s bar, the U. S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights has been prosecuting grade schools and high schools that don’t stamp out the “sexual harassment” rampant in the schools’ “hostile hallways” . . . Not only is Political Correctness not at fault, but by ascribing blame to local outbreaks of PC, the pests in the Department of Education are let off the hook. Republican lawmakers, who seem to have forgotten the reasons for eliminating the Department of Education, may want to consider renewing their efforts.

But even *The Washington Times* missed the presence of the education establishment in this dispute in at least three other and perhaps even more important ways.

First, although the private intentions of its members are undoubtedly of the best, this establishment has an equally undoubted interest in making sure that black children continue to fail, because that feeds the call for “more resources.” In fact, they continue to fail because there is no penalty for failure—no penalty on the schools, I mean. The penalties on the pupils last a lifetime. But the schools are never called to account for the damage they inflict, and keeping them run by an ever “resource”-starved state bureaucracy is the way to ensure that that state of affairs continues.

Second, the establishment also has, partly

for the same reason, an interest in making sure that the fraud of “self-esteem” continues to govern educational philosophy. Michelle Locke reporting on the issue in *The Washington Post* noted that:

The American Speech, Language and Hearing Association has classified Black English as a social dialect with its own lexicon and syntax.

For instance, if a student says “He done did it” for “he has done it,” teachers would translate the phrase to standard English, rather than just correcting the student.

In other words, the whole Ebonics movement is an exercise in racial tact. Functionally, calling the first sentence incorrect and calling it correct but in another language are exactly equivalent. But the pretense of there being another “language” in which the incorrect would be correct preserves the pupil’s self-esteem. As a former teacher, I always thought it self-evident that most students were troubled more by too much than by too little self-esteem. And for hundreds of years, educational techniques have been designed not to build it up but to break it down. When we changed this fundamental philosophy (the change was pretty much completed in the 1960s, though it had its beginnings with Dewey and others in the 1930s), educational standards began their precipitous decline. Could there be a causal connection?

Third and most importantly, the educational establishment has an interest in perpetuating the idea that all language is equal. This is what is behind the literary theory movement as well as the “multicultural” agitation in our universities. It is only in such an atmosphere that a sufficient and all-effective damnation of the whole Ebonics business cannot be effected by asking: “Where is the literature of Ebonics?” As Jacob Heilbrunn put it in *The New Republic* of January 20,

The purveyors of Ebonics have picked up enough academic argot to maintain that, since all reality is socially constructed, there is no

such thing as a “good” or a “bad” version of English. On the contrary, demands that black children conform to white bourgeois notions of “good” English amount to an attempt to destroy African American identity and culture.

It was this view which lay behind the contribution of Patricia J. Williams to the debate on the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times*:

While accent prompts many levels of discrimination in the United States, there is no greater talisman of lower or underclass status than the black accent (or any, really), no greater license to mock than with some imitation of black speech. Whether in the Dartmouth Review or “The Lion King,” black English is the perpetual symbolic code for ignorance, evil and jest, the lingo of hep cats and hyenas. . . . Is it really any wonder that there is such an ambivalent response to mainstream standardized speech patterns among black children when the “standard” is so often imparted with such missionary conviction about eliminating “bad” linguistic acts? It’s as if the very spontaneity of their speaking were an extension of the general lawlessness of black existence.

Professor Williams, who teaches at Columbia Law School, and has been named this year’s Reith lecturer on the BBC, can treat casually and familiarly the idea of an abolition of all linguistic standards. She knows that it is almost becoming a commonplace of the academic world that there are no “bad” linguistic acts,” and that only the “missionaries” of fascist authoritarianism would threaten the right of hopelessly incompetent teachers to go on being incompetent. Thus Professor Williams concludes that “maybe part of what we are sidestepping in the fight about standardized speech practices is the ongoing abandonment of public schools, a de facto flight begun with the resistance to the promise of Brown v. Board of Education.” Naturally, she goes on to note the “clarion call for commitment to public education as standard.”

Nor are such views confined to academia. In the same day's *New York Times*, Karen De Witt wrote a lighthearted piece noting that white America already speaks Ebonics, as "Americans of all varieties spice up their English with the argot of black America." Even Richard Nixon said "Right on." In particular, she notes that "the vocabulary of rock 'n' roll comes directly out of the idiom of black speech"—in the words of Mahmoud El-Kati, a professor of History at Macalester College. So Ebonics turns out to be another way of cultural leveling: black English gains respectability from its appropriation by pop culture, and pop culture gets to pat itself on the back (again) for being more progressive than stuffy old high culture, which no one anymore—surely?—wants to defend.

Naturally enough, besides increased resources and not being required to take on the stressful business of correcting naïve

self-esteem, America's educators would very much like to be able to go on teaching rap, or Simon & Garfunkel, instead of Shakespeare—partly because they don't know any Shakespeare. But even if this latter hope still seems slightly utopian, it is always useful for defenders of the status quo to redirect the argument otherwheres than to real efforts at change. In other words, Ebonics is stasis masquerading as change, a defense of ignorance and inarticulacy because these things are far more difficult to improve than to leave alone. Already the schools are doing little to change the illiterate speech patterns of their pupils, and this is their way of proposing to do even less, with more money, while justifying their own negligence. Moreover, it is couched in such terms as to excite debate on subjects quite different from the subject that we ought to focus on—which is how to destroy the educational establishment and all its works.

How good was Auden?

by Jeffrey Hart

Professor Edward Mendelson of Columbia University now seems to own Auden country. The poet's literary executor, he has edited *The English Auden*, the convenient selected Auden (Knopf), *Complete Poems* (Vintage), and now has well in hand the vast Auden Project underway at Princeton. Though the Princeton Hydrogen Fusion Project is on hold because of funding problems, the Auden Project moves smoothly ahead. Of *The Complete Works of Auden*, we so far have had *Plays and Other Dramatic Writings 1928–1938*; *Libretti and Other Dramatic Writings 1939–1973*; two volumes of the complete Auden poems are forthcoming. The latest offering, *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse. Volume 1: 1926–1938*,¹ is the first of four volumes of the poet's miscellaneous prose.

Obviously the sheer scale is overwhelming, and, to begin with, four things should be said about this volume: (1) Professor Mendelson is a splendid editor, helpful and never intrusive; (2) that Auden wrote in such quantity is amazing; he must have been writing even while taking a shower; (3) this volume, just conceivably, will be of interest to biographers, historians, and other scholars; and (4) its interest as literature approaches zero.

¹ *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse. Volume 1: 1926–1938*, by W. H. Auden, edited by Edward Mendelson; Princeton University Press, 952 pages, \$59.50.

The two most substantial items here are *Letter from Iceland*, with Louis MacNeice (1936), and *Journey to a War*, with Christopher Isherwood (1938). They are both rather strange objects. Commissioned by Faber to write a travel book, Auden, larking, picked Iceland, was joined there by MacNeice, and stayed through the spring and summer of 1937. If you have a special interest in the topography and culture of Iceland, this book might appeal to you. Auden added a good many *Don Juan* stanzas as a "Letter to Lord Byron," and the two poets together added a terza rima "Auden and MacNeice: Their Last Will and Testament," this last consisting of veiled salacious gossip about their acquaintances in London. Neither the prose nor the verse in this book is of any distinction whatever, and the point of the whole thing is elusive. Before the reader opens the book, he might imagine that Iceland is a synecdoche for something, but it isn't. It's just Iceland. For some reason the book was reissued in 1969.

In 1937, Faber plunged again and commissioned another travel book, suggesting the Far East, so Auden—and this time Christopher Isherwood—decided to drop in on the war between Japan and China, the two writers knowing nothing about Japan or China and nothing about the war itself. Isherwood wrote the prose accounts, with the help of Auden's diary; Auden took the photographs (with decidedly mixed results) and wrote twenty-seven sonnets called "In

Time of War," plus a verse commentary on them. Auden and Isherwood traveled around, listened to some distant artillery, met Chiang and Madame Chiang as well as Chou En-lai and assorted generals, and produced a book that has nothing of interest to say about China or the war. The sonnets and the verse commentary do not amount to much.

At the beginning of 1937, Auden also traveled to Spain with the vague intention of helping the government side by becoming an ambulance driver. Nothing came of this. He sent home a couple of banal descriptions of Spain and soon returned to England thoroughly disillusioned by what he had seen, but reticent in talking about it.

During the period covered by this enormous volume of prose, he was, similarly, a tourist among ideas, variously engaged with biology, psychology, education, politics (vaguely), literature, and religion. There is little coherence in all this, no sense of a core of seriousness or intellectual direction, and no evident capacity for discriminating among ideas with regard to their importance. He was much taken, for example, by Gerald Heard's book *Social Substance in Religion*, the main point of which seems to be that agape can be experienced only in small groups of about twelve. Of course this came to nothing. And, throughout the 1930s, Auden felt the need for a "revolution" of some sort, social or personal, but could never settle on just what sort of revolution might suffice.

In sum, one reads through this material with mounting dismay. At about the same age, for example, T. S. Eliot was producing a formidable body of critical prose intimately involved with his poetry of the time and powerful enough to produce a revolution in taste, making us view seventeenth-century poetry in a new way. We know that later on Auden could produce critical work of great distinction, as in *The Enchafèd Flood* (1950), an exploration of some central themes of Romanticism. Yet what connection there might be between Auden's prose and his poetry remains to be

established. So far, I have to conclude that there is very little.

But what now, as this vast publishing project goes forward at Princeton, do we think of Auden as a poet? Those two great definitive volumes of his poetry are in the offing, and it is with the poetry that our interest surely lies.

During the 1930s it was not uncommon to rank Auden very high, among, or even superior to, the best poets of the time. In 1937, to cite a typical example, Geoffrey Grigson's magazine *New Verse* published a special double issue devoted to Auden as a poet. He was hailed there as "the finest living poet," and such expressions as "greatness," and "the Auden age" were scattered widely in the tributes. In all of this one senses a long-nourished irritation with T. S. Eliot, which tended to elevate Auden. But Eliot, Yeats, Stevens, Pound, and Frost were still alive and writing in 1937, and so one way to pose the Auden question would be to ask whether he was a sixth among them. Coordinate with that question would be an attempt to define the precise nature of his poetic achievement. We have to say that overall Auden stands well outside the tradition of high modernism. Four of the poets just mentioned belong to that tradition quite obviously; and so does Frost, though in a slightly disguised way.

Auden as a poet is a sort of journalist of the modern experience, but he himself remains apart from that experience. He makes his visits to the Front, so to speak—even as he did in China and Spain—and he files his poetic dispatches to a rather snug audience back home. To the considerable extent that Auden's poetry is related to Victorian light verse (Professor Mendelson's volume contains his Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*), Auden's poetry assumes his audience of like-minded readers. This audience, of presumed sophisticates, stands in relation to events and ideas more or less as the poet does. Thus Auden is, broadly, Horatian. One point of the Horatian is that it is not Virgilian: Horace

writes epistles and not epics, and he does not internalize such complexities as Virgil's. One point of Auden is that, analogously, he is not Eliot. In no sense is Eliot's poetry "social verse" in the Horatian manner.

The assumption of the high modernist is that order has collapsed in a comprehensive way, and in every realm except one. It has collapsed religiously, metaphysically, morally, and socially. Only in the realm of art can order be sustained, and is sustained there with great difficulty. Art is the last refuge of the Logos. (Of course, Eliot did arrive at Christianity, but very importantly via correspondences with linguistic and artistic experience.) For the high modernist, artistic order is a matter of extreme exigency. Each line, each metaphor, each suggestion arrives under immense pressure. "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish?" Or: "What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands/ What water lapping the bow . . . ?" These are not reports from the Front. These are the Front itself. High modernism tends toward concentration and difficulty. Its presumed audience is anything but snug back in London. In fact, London Bridge is falling down, falling down. . . . The real war is not over there somewhere in China or in Spain. The audience must be able at least to imagine a cosmic chill.

Auden does write often of this or that catastrophe, but as "current events," and he brings back his reports to an audience secure in its "sophistication." There is also an unmistakable note of play here, as if when drastic experience occurs it does so to the sensibility of schoolboy chums.

Our hopes were still set on the spies' career,
Prizing the glasses and the old felt hat,
And all the secrets we discovered were
Extraordinary and false.

That, from 1926. The enjambment between lines three and four is effective, and the let-down joke isn't bad. But other poems play the same tune, as in the widely anthologized "Secret Agent" from about the same time:

Control of the passes was, he saw, the key
To this new district, but who would get it?
He, the trained spy, had walked into the trap
For a bogus guide, seduced by the old tricks.

That's fun, but there really isn't much more to say about it, is there? This is the Byronic Auden, the Auden who "sat in one of the dives/ On Fifty-second Street,/ Uncertain and afraid" as the panzers crashed into Poland. (About his omission of this and other poems from his final canon a comment in a moment.) This Byronic Auden is a persistent figure in his poetry until his more domestic last phase. It does not lack a certain understated power:

It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens,
Hearing the frogs exhaling from the pond . . .
Season when lovers and writers find
An altering speech for altering things . . .

Yes, things are bad, and the poet-as-journalist does touch ordinary life. We have all read the bad headlines and taken a walk in the public gardens. These certainly are not Marvell's gardens or the garden in "Burnt Norton," but our ordinary garden, and ordinariness has its power. Auden's language barely nudges itself out of banality and into poetry, but it does do so. Still—and maybe this is its ironic point—the poem itself really cannot offer that "altering language" it talks about. There are no Nightingales or Golden Birds in these gardens. We, Auden says, cannot sing. That is one part of our pathos. We are little more than "children afraid of the night,/ Who have never been happy or good," as Auden wrote in another poem. It is troubling to ponder the sort of acquiescence Auden expected from his "sophisticated" audience for lines like that, for that kind of self-pity.

But let us take Auden at his very best. Everyone, I think, could list perhaps thirty poems by Auden that we would not willingly do without, and perhaps a dozen that are commonly considered part of the twentieth-century canon. In that latter category I

doubt that anyone would argue against the inclusion of "Musée des Beaux Arts," one of Auden's most anthologized poems. In fact, it is an emblematic poem for Auden. He placed it first in his *Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (1945), a defining volume, implicitly asserting his bid to become the great poet at the war's end. "About suffering they were never wrong,/ The Old Masters: how well they understood/ Its human position, how it takes place/ While someone else is eating or opening a window . . ." This is Auden at his best. Its idea has merit. Yes, life goes on, and there will be Monday and Tuesday after Easter Sunday. In the poem this idea seems perfectly realized, though it is a limited idea in itself.

And yet we run up against something that happens often in Auden, even thus at his best. When you have read the poem, what more is there to say about it? Does it open up into further reaches of reflection? To be sure, the Auden audience would be charmed by its own agreement with the idea in this poem, but like the ship that "Had somewhere to go and sailed calmly on" after witnessing the fall of Icarus, they, too, would sail calmly on. Moreover, the poem itself is so assured, so "complete," that it would seem unmannerly to point out that the Old Masters knew no such thing, that the poem rests on a single canvas by Brueghel, and that the Old Masters were attuned, certainly, to the extraordinary. They painted madonnas, crucifixions, martyrdoms, Annunciations, John the Baptists, even the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—just to mention a few items. The "Musée des Beaux Arts" is light verse, social verse really, and it expects uncritical agreement from its presumably charmed audience.

Certainly, no one in that audience would be rude enough to say that this poem, standing there at the forefront of the *Collected Poetry*, can be read as an emblem of Auden as a poet, proclaiming him no Icarus—and, indeed, he isn't. He will not rise too near the sun. He writes about many Icaris—Yeats, Freud, Melville, Voltaire, Homer, Shakespeare, Rimbaud, and, yes, Hen-

ry James—but he is not of their company. When he writes on them, his poems are reports about them, and comfortable ones at that.

Apropos of "Musée des Beaux Arts," I said that such successful Auden poems as this undertake an idea, present it, and insofar as it goes leave nothing more to be said. For successful Auden poems of this sort, try such a sample as "The Fall of Rome," "The Shield of Achilles," "Fleet Visit." These are all rather late in his career, but nothing has changed; they are achieved and complete. Nothing more can be said. After you have read Yeats's "Among School Children," Eliot's "Gerontion," or Frost's "Birches," there is a lot more to be thought and said. These are poems of a different kind, achievements of a different order.

Even at his very best, in poems everyone agrees represent Auden at his best, there are peculiar problems. One can address them by beginning with a lesser poem about a huge subject—Montaigne, no less. Well, Auden does like the big subjects. Auden essentially writes "social poetry," but in what society, for what audience, is it acceptable to write about Montaigne this way?

Outside his library window he could see
A gentle landscape terrified of grammar,
Cities where lisping was compulsory
And provinces where it was death to stammer.

The hefty lay exhausted. O it took
This donnish undersexed conservative . . .

Wait a minute. On that last point, has anyone in his audience read "On Experience"? Much of what I've quoted here depends for its effectiveness on an unjustified "sentiment of knowledge": the references to "grammar," "lisping," and "stammering," for example. The poem virtually depends upon these supposed historical "allusions."

That is a minor Auden poem, but everyone agrees that his elegy on Yeats is major Auden, and there is much to praise here. Yet Auden thought that his audience would let him get away with this:

Time that with this strange excuse
 Pardoned Kipling and his views,
 And will pardon Paul Claudel,
 Pardons him for writing well.

That's the last stanza of the poem. "Pardons him"? Pardons Yeats? Yeats needs no pardon from anyone, least of all "Time." And what "views" of these three writers require "pardon"? They had hundreds of different "views." The nouns "Kipling" and "Claudel" are mere conventional poker chips here, but Auden's audience knew what to think before they read the stanza. And so it goes.

With the excuse that these episodes are not recorded in the Auden biographies, I will append a personal note about him. Auden was highly visible in Manhattan during the 1950s and 1960s, but the first time I engaged him in genuine conversation was during his visit in 1963 to Dartmouth, where by that time I was teaching. A previous visit by Auden had been a legendary disaster, but in 1963 he was on his best behavior, and was entirely charming. His only public responsibility was a "conversation" in a *gemütlich* room with a smallish group of students and faculty. He read some of his poems and commented on them, answered questions, and joked pleasantly. Throughout, his manner was Oxford and self-deprecating, always the master poet as worldly friend.

How much had he been influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr? "I once read a great deal of him. He has a sound sense of human limitation. No utopias. I admired him greatly. Probably didn't understand a word of him." Why did he go to Spain during the war? "Awfully young then, you know." I tried out a defense of "Spain 1937" and "September 1, 1939" as dramatic monologues from that period that expressed what one shocked individual at that time might have felt. Auden was firm, or, at least as firm as his manner would permit. He took the position that there were lines in the poems that might be a "bad influence," no doubt meaning the one in "Spain" about the "necessary murder." Later, in his forward to

a 1965 collection, he took another position, that he had not really meant these poems, that they were only rhetoric. I think them good Byronic period pieces. But so that afternoon of 1963 went.

Auden's previous visit to Dartmouth, I was given to understand, had been very different. It must have occurred in the late 1940s when he was working on *The Enchafèd Flood*. He had given one of those "conversations," and then gone on to a faculty cocktail party at which he drank a notable number of martinis, and then on to a faculty dinner at which he drank more martinis and a lot of wine.

When he arrived at the auditorium where he was to deliver a paper on Romanticism, he tripped over the top step while mounting to the stage and his typescript spilled across the platform. Putting the pages back in correct order was of course beyond him. So, with his Oxford aplomb, he pulled them together out of order and read whatever page came to the surface. The audience thought the essay had many fine insights, but was a bit lacking in structure, though charming.

Franklin in Pennsylvania

Francis Jennings Benjamin Franklin, Politician: The Mask and the Man.
 W. W. Norton, 240 pages, \$27.50

reviewed by Richard Brookhiser

In a series of prose sketches of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention, William Pierce of Georgia noted of Benjamin Franklin that, while he was "well known to be the greatest philosopher of the present age," he did not "seem to let politics engage his attention." Franklin fostered this impression in his *Autobiography*, where he wrote that his first election to the Pennsylvania assembly "was repeated every Year for Ten Years, without my ever asking any Elector for his Vote, or signifying either directly or indirectly any Desire of being chosen."

Contemporaries and credulous readers of the *Autobiography* might believe this, but we should not. More than any of the Founders, Franklin was a man of multiple and shifting identities. One of the best known today is the one that dazzled Pierce: Franklin the scientist-sage, flying his kite, inventing his stove, and writing his almanacs. Almost as well known is Franklin the randy old man, flirting with Frenchwomen, and penning the essay on farting which is still advertised in supermarket tabloids. Last year, Robert Middlekauff (*Benjamin Franklin and His Enemies*) gave us the angry man, a proud and prickly Franklin bearing life-long grudges against former associates, including his son William. One historian has even argued that Franklin the American patriot was in fact a British agent during the Revolutionary War. Poor Brits—if they used Franklin in such a capacity, he was surely feeding them disinformation.

Francis Jennings is best known for a trio of histories on war and empire-building on the colonial frontier. The title of the first, *The Invasion of America* (i.e., by white men), captures the tone. Jennings weaves a complicated tale, distinguishing not only between the competing interests of British, French, and Indians, but between those of different Indian tribes and different British colonies. But when he goes into overdrive, he rails against the anti-Indian bias of early and modern Americans, especially historians. He would seem to be an unlikely biographer for a paleface.

The Franklin that emerges in Jennings's *Benjamin Franklin, Politician*, however, is a sympathetic figure: "a giant who was believably human." The inconsistencies and deceptions which confirm his humanity arose, Jennings believes, from the fact that Franklin was a genius forced to conceal his *virtu* from his fellows. "He came early to an understanding of his own mental and physical superiority, which he delighted in showing off by constructing mathematical magic squares and performing feats of long-range swimming. Such entertaining

displays of vanity threatened no one and made no enemies, and Franklin took good care to hide other manifestations of superiority." The manifestation that interests Jennings is Franklin's skill as a politician, which he honed in the jockeying of mid-eighteenth-century Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania was one of the first states to develop a modern party system, and even before independence, it had a set of competing interest groups and voting blocs. First came the Quakers, whose main goal was the preservation of religious liberty. They were divided into "defense" and orthodox Quakers. Defense Quakers were willing to fund the military defense of the colony, so long as it was done discreetly—at the outbreak of one war, the Pennsylvania assembly voted four thousand pounds for the purchase of "Bread, Beef, Port, Flour, Wheat or other Grain," meaning gunpowder. Beginning in the 1750s, the purist wing withdrew from political life rather than make such compromises. Next was a large number of German-speaking refugees from the wars and persecutions of Louis XIV (Herbert Hoover and Dwight Eisenhower descended from Pennsylvania German families). Many of them, like the Mennonites, followed religions similar to Quakerism, and they all placed a high value on religious liberty. Anglicans and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians chafed at Quaker principles, and wished to impose their own. Sitting atop these factions were the proprietors of the colony, the Penns. The Penns literally owned Pennsylvania, every bit as much as Bill Gates owns Microsoft. But in order to make a profit from their huge property, they had to attract purchasers of land, which they did by ceding rights to the assembly, and by guaranteeing that their tracts were clear of Indian claims. William Penn, the founder of the colony, bought out the Indians in the open market. His son Thomas employed other means.

Benjamin Franklin came to Philadelphia, the capital of this not-so-melting pot, from Boston in 1723, when he was seventeen. His

trade was printing, and one of the most lucrative contracts in the colony was printing the laws and paper money of the assembly. Franklin got the contract in his twenties, becoming an associate of the leaders of the main English-speaking factions. He worked more closely with the Proprietary faction, which had the most patronage to dispense. But the Quakers controlled the assembly, and Franklin stayed on good terms at least with the defense wing (he called orthodox Quakers "stiff-rumps"). He was scathing about the Germans. "Why should the Palatine Boors be suffered to swarm into our settlements, and by herding together establish their Language and Manners to the Exclusion of ours? Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of *Aliens*?" A special reason for Franklin's ire against the Germans was that they had their own printers.

In 1737, as Franklin was rising in the world, Thomas Penn, desperate to extricate his family from debt, turned to an expedient with grave consequences. In order to clear the banks of the Delaware River for sale, he told the Delaware Indian chief who owned the land that an old deed of his father's entitled him to whatever territories his men could walk around in a day and a half. Penn's agents blazed a trail ahead of time and, in a frontier power walk, dispossessed the Delaware of all he had. In his Ph.D. dissertation thirty years ago, Jennings showed that the "Walking Purchase" was worse than a hardball real estate deal: Thomas Penn's interpretation of the old deed was fraudulent, and the minutes of the meeting in which the chief allegedly acknowledged it were doctored afterwards. Jennings cannot say whether Franklin knew what his patrons had done. "Perhaps [he] realized that some game was afoot and preferred not to inquire too closely."

The Delawares took their revenge in 1755, with the outbreak of the Seven Years' War. After a British army which had been sent to capture Fort Duquesne (now Pittsburgh) was destroyed in the woods, the Delawares

descended on the defenseless colony, killing or kidnapping more than four hundred settlers. "Houses and Improvements," wrote a contemporary source, were "reduced to Ashes." The selfishness of the Proprietary faction in the face of this crisis turned Franklin against them. When the assembly, which Franklin by then dominated, proposed a tax on land (including Penn family land) to pay for defense, Thomas Penn balked. The quarrel between assembly and proprietor went all the way to London, where Franklin confronted Penn in 1757. Penn told him that if immigrants to the colony "were deceiv'd" in expecting political rights,

it was their own Fault; and that he said with a Kind of triumphing laughing Insolence, such as a low Jockey might do when a Purchaser complained that He had cheated him in a Horse. I . . . conceived that Moment a more cordial and thorough Contempt for him than I ever before felt for any Man living.

Though Penn's henchmen offered Franklin a "fat price" to cooperate, he refused, and rallied the embattled colony to defend itself. Jennings judges Franklin's resistance to "enemies without and within" to be "his finest hour."

The military problem was finally solved by a strange alliance between General John Forbes, the new British commander in North America, and the pacifist wing of the Quakers, who had formed a Friendly Association for Regaining and Preserving Peace with the Indians by Pacific Measures. The Friendly Association reestablished such good relations with the Delawares that when Forbes marched on Fort Duquesne in 1759 he took it without firing a shot.

Franklin meanwhile had decided that Pennsylvania's problems went deeper than Thomas Penn and his minions. Proprietary rulers, he wrote, were not "worse Men than other Rulers," nor were "all People in Proprietary Governments . . . worse People than those in other Governments. I suspect, therefore, that the Cause is radical, inter-

woven in the Constitution . . . and will therefore produce its Effects as long as such Governments continue." Franklin's solution was to eliminate the proprietors and bring Pennsylvania under the authority of the British crown.

Crown government, however, would mean the establishment of the Church of England. This the defense Quakers and the Germans could not accept. They turned against Franklin (his anti-German tirades, reprinted by his enemies, did not help) and he lost his seat in the assembly in the election of 1764, though his allies retained enough influence to send him to London as Pennsylvania's agent, where he pursued his vision of colonial royalism for the next decade.

Franklin enjoyed his years in England, associating sometimes with fellows of the Royal Society, sometimes with members of the Hellfire Club, a gang of noble rakes with a taste for whores and black masses. Along the way, he managed to get his illegitimate son, William, appointed Governor of New Jersey (John Adams called the elevation of this "base born brat" an "Insult to the Morals of America"). There is every reason to think Franklin could have continued to live on happily in England if his vision of empire had been realized. What Franklin and Joseph Galloway, Speaker of the Pennsylvania assembly, wanted was something like the Dominion system that evolved more than a century later: a confederation of independent domains, each running its own affairs, united by a common crown. They had not reckoned that Parliament, and the King, might be as self-interested as the Penns. By 1773, Franklin was writing the Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives recommending "a general Congress" of the colonies. "Such a step I imagine will bring the Dispute to a Crisis." The crisis split the colonial royalists asunder. Benjamin Franklin sailed for Philadelphia in March 1775. William Franklin and Galloway sided with Britain.

Jennings leaves Franklin before the climax of his political career: his service on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence (Jefferson wrote about "sacred and undeniable" truths; Franklin changed it to "self-evident"); his star turn as American Minister to France; his deathless throwaways at the Constitutional Convention ("a republic, if you can keep it"; "I have the happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting Sun"). But he had learned the trade of politics, and his dislike of irresponsible rule, in the rough and tumble of his adopted home.

Rigorously equivocal

Geoffrey Galt Harpham *One of Us: The Mastery of Joseph Conrad.* University of Chicago Press, 192 pages, \$35; \$14.95 paper

reviewed by Brooke Allen

Over the course of the last two decades the name of Joseph Conrad has incongruously become, at least within the academy, synonymous with racism, imperialism, and the patriarchy. Conrad's political star began to wane when Chinua Achebe, in a now famous essay of 1975, called Conrad "a thoroughgoing racist," claimed that *Heart of Darkness* "celebrates" the dehumanization of African people, and attacked Conrad as a "purveyor of comforting myths"—comforting, that is, to Europeans. This theme has been picked up by other eminent intellectual opinion-makers: in his recent book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (though an admirer of the writer) regretted Conrad's inability to "grant the natives their freedom" or even to imagine that "Africa or South America could ever have had an independent history or culture." Feminist scholar Nina Pelikan Straus has charged Conrad with "complicity in the racist, sexist, imperialist . . . world he has inhabited with Kurtz."

And so it goes. As a result Conrad, or at

any rate *Heart of Darkness*, his best known novel and the one which has traditionally been taught in literature survey courses, has by now become a hot potato few professors enjoy tossing about with students primed to interpret every text in light of the contemporary political issues of race, class, and gender. In *Great Books*,¹ his account of the Lit-Hum course at Columbia University, David Denby describes the class spent on *Heart of Darkness* as the most explosive unit of the entire year, bringing previously hidden hatred and rage dangerously close to the surface. In today's heavily politicized academic environment, the single important issue about *Heart of Darkness* has become the question of whether the novel is, or is not, racist. The very use of the word "racist" in association with Conrad is an anachronism and should indicate how radically our *Zeitgeist* has changed since Conrad's day, and how inappropriate, even irrelevant, our own ideological terms turn out to be when applied to writers of a century ago.

The fact is that if one uses the word in the way that it is understood by Achebe and the many academic critics who have followed him, not only Conrad but every one of his contemporaries was a racist: systemic racism was an integral part of the world view of 1899 (when Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness*). Though the Congress Party had been established in India some fifteen years earlier, Indian self-rule was, in Europe, a concept that had yet to be accorded significant respect. The Europeans who felt sympathy toward Africans expressed that sympathy not through political solidarity but by donating to missionary groups that would Christianize and "civilize" the continent, whose population was still overwhelmingly illiterate. The Boer War in South Africa, a conflict contemporaneous with the writing of *Heart of Darkness*, was a fight for Dutch, not for African, autonomy. So—Conrad was a racist, as indeed who was not?

Still, it seems unfair to pick specifically on

Conrad, surely one of the less politically baneful of the great modern writers. Eliot was an occasionally vicious anti-Semite, a fact of which his readers must always have been aware and of which the general public has lately been reminded by Anthony Julius's book *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form*. Pound was a vociferous booster of European fascism; Lawrence laid out a plan for a proto-Nazi society that anticipated Hitler's by more than a decade. Waugh declared himself a supporter of Franco and Mussolini. Even Woolf, exhibit A in the current feminist canon, was guilty of a really appalling social snobbery, and Forster, for all his impeccable liberal credentials, cravenly resisted coming out of the closet, or openly speaking out for homosexual causes.

Compared with many of his illiberal peers, then, Conrad seems to have gotten a bum rap. It is, at any rate, peculiar that Conrad—who as a native of partitioned Poland, growing up under Russian domination, was more a victim of imperial expansion than a natural propagandist for it—should have been chosen as the favorite scapegoat of anti-colonialist writers. *Heart of Darkness* was in fact one of the first important works of art to draw attention to the degradation and destruction inherent in the colonial system and to imply that it might be a force for evil rather than for good. Indeed, it is probably the novel's success on that front that has put it in the canon and kept it there.

In a new study of Conrad's work, *One of Us: The Mastery of Joseph Conrad*, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, a professor at Tulane University, attempts to remove the figure of Conrad from the raging factions of the academy and view him in the context of his own place and time. Not that Harpham could be called a counterrevolutionary: he gives a hearing to every critical school and treats it with respect when respect is due—and often when it is not. One of the more ridiculous contributions to Conrad criticism quoted by Harpham is from Terry Eagleton,

¹ See Roger Kimball's review "David Denby Goes to School" in *The New Criterion* (November 1996).

Warton Professor of English at Oxford, who says that the scene in *Nostromo* where Nostromo and Decoud drift on a lighter in the Golfo Placido reflects an awareness of the “crisis in the ideology of the Western bourgeois class” and “the history of imperialist capitalism.” Another gem is from Wayne Koestenbaum of Yale, who claims that writing collaboration between men, as practiced by Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, represents a “metaphorical sexual intercourse.” What Harpham does achieve is a level of coolness and reason that is to be admired in the heated context of contemporary cultural studies—though he has the unfortunate academic habit of using five words where one would suffice, and of going to painful lengths to state the obvious.

Harpham’s opening chapter concentrates on Conrad’s identity as a Pole—in other words, as a citizen of a country that had ceased to exist some sixty years before his birth, with its third partition between Russia, Prussia, and Austria. Poland, as Harpham points out, “did not exist as a sovereign state, and was, rather, a theoretical entity, the absent cause of a defiant but literally groundless patriotism.” Conrad described Poland as being “compressed between Prussian Germanism on one side and Russian Slavonism on the other. For Germanism it feels nothing but hatred. But between Polonism and Slavonism there is not so much hatred as a complete and ineradicable incompatibility.”

Poland, unlike its reactionary neighbors, had long boasted flourishing liberal traditions and had developed a unique, democratic form of government—the “Royal Republic”—at a historical moment when other Central European powers were still absolute monarchies. Conrad was the son of a vociferous patriot and rebel against the Russian oppressors, and was brought up with the enlightened ideals of the *szlachta* (gentry) class to which he belonged, a class which, as Harpham points out, “confuses the most fundamental distinction of traditional Marxist theory—that between the

ruling class and the revolutionary class—by being both.”

Thus Conrad, despite his adoption of England and the English language, was in a position to regard imperialism—even the imperialism of England, his adopted country—with cynicism if not hostility. In fact, as Harpham correctly states, Conrad’s fictional stance “with respect to the national-imperial project, whether English, Dutch, French, or American, is rigorously equivocal.” Imperialism is a large, perhaps the largest, fact in the world he writes about: he describes its workings, but to judge it is the reader’s job, not his own. As for racism, Harpham claims that “Conrad seems capable of placing racist and nonracist thinking on the scale and finding them equal, just as he finds people of different races equal notwithstanding the many inequalities in their circumstances.”

Conrad’s decision, at the age of sixteen, to join the British merchant navy and leave Poland for a life at sea was obviously a significant one for both his life and his work, but it is doubtful whether its ramifications need so many, and such florid, explanations as Harpham gives us. “The ship is a mere point of salience in an homogenous cosmic colloid, one node of a general system of meditation that can accommodate, it seems, all differences,” he writes, in one of the book’s sillier passages. Still, Harpham makes a number of striking points, and I was surprised to find myself thoroughly convinced by his demonstration of a consistent homosexual subtext in the fiction.

His argument is not that Conrad was a closet homosexual, but that his attitudes towards sex were complex and unresolved: not too surprising, when one considers the consistent ineptitude with which Conrad treated women in his fiction. He appears to have tried whenever possible to avoid the subject altogether, and a letter he wrote to Edward Garnett bears this theory out: “The Secret Sharer between you and me, is *it*. Eh? No damned tricks with girls there.” “Conrad,” Harpham writes, “is not insensi-

tive to or disrespectful of a biological imperative to propagate, but his enthusiasm for this imperative is decidedly restrained." Yet the critic goes on to prove that sex, even when ostensibly banished from the author's novels, is nevertheless discreetly present, usually in homoerotic form.

Harpham does not gloss over Conrad's shortcomings. As Leavis said, Conrad's "classical status will not rest evenly upon his whole *oeuvre*," and Harpham goes well beyond Leavis's list of gripes, such as Conrad's "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery," his imposition of "a 'significance' that is merely an emotional insistence on the presence of what he can't produce," and a "certain simplicity of outlook and attitude." These faults and others make Conrad quite off-putting to a sizeable proportion of his readers. He is often sickeningly sentimental. His humorlessness makes his fiction unnecessarily heavy going; Harpham intelligently notes Conrad's "only access to humor" to be a certain habitual tone of "bitter irony." Harpham also points to Conrad's habit, attributable to his artistic vocation as a symbolist, of building his novels around an emotional vacuum:

Even the more imposing figures can function as "nothing": Lord Jim is merely the center of a moral problem of responsibility; Kurtz is merely the center of the imperial encounter with the Other; Nostromo is merely the center of the struggle between the force of international capital and emergent nationalist political movement. All are more significant for what goes on around them, including narration, than for what they are or do.

This is true, and it is the reason that Conrad so often is just plain boring. The moral problem tends to be made evident early

in the narrative, and its subsequent playing out by a cast of characters whose only life is in their function within a constructed moral scheme can be tedious.

Harpham also skewers Conrad's frequent verbal floundering, his apparent inability to get to the point. He expresses his own suspicion that Conrad is "simply incapable of *achieving* the commonplace, of writing—for example—an ordinary letter." Conrad himself, perhaps in defense of this inadequacy, once gave the opinion that "explicitness is fatal to the glamour of all work" and, on the first page of *Under Western Eyes*, wrote that "words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality." Well, up to a point. A *little* bit of explicitness does not always come amiss; on the other hand, a habit of repetitive insistence, of which Conrad is also guilty, can be just as detrimental to the effect as is vagueness.

Conrad was a complex literary figure and Harpham, to his credit, does not attempt to make him the less so by forcing him into an simplistic classification like "racist" or, on the other hand, "anti-colonialist." To do so would make Conrad more the partisan and less the artist. Chinua Achebe's essay on *Heart of Darkness* proposes that great art can only be "on the side of man's deliverance and not his enslavement." I believe that this is demonstrably, if unfortunately, wrong—though I suppose that much depends upon one's definition of "deliverance," and also upon just how rigorous one's definition of "great" might happen to be. Harpham's own arresting explanation of literature's many "scoundrel geniuses" is to propose that greatness, just possibly, might be "inseparable from certain kinds of reprehensibility." But perhaps the truth is that ideally art is neither moral nor immoral, but impartially amoral.

Benign obscurity

by Donald Justice

A literary critic must be prepared to say, "This is good, though I don't know why; not yet anyhow"; indeed his more formative opinions are nearly always like that.

—William Empson

The basic notion is probably less novel than I want it to be, and I may be behind the times to think that it has anything new about it. But I suppose everyone must agree that, in the normal course of going through poems, we put up with a good deal of obscurity, and with oddly little complaining; and I think this merits some attention, if not concern. I hope I will not be seen as joining the very popular revolt against reason and good sense if I suggest that there is in fact something to be said for obscurity in some of its simpler forms. It can at the very least be a sign of the presence of something hidden, of something perhaps too difficult to express easily, or even, for some tastes, a sort of code for the seemingly spontaneous or inspired.

All too often, I find that others have seen and understood a poem more quickly than I have done, certainly more thoroughly. Yet I hardly think this deprives me of the influx of pleasure a reader of poetry is entitled to expect from a good poem. Mine may or may not be a feeling different from what other readers, perhaps luckier than I, experience; it seems to me as deep and as secure. It even seems that whatever I do see and understand at first glance, so to speak,

is crucial, perhaps even the most important aspect of the reading experience, though it obviously can only be incomplete and partial. Eliot speaks of having been "passionately fond of certain French poetry long before [he] could have translated two verses of it correctly"; and even if you have not had precisely that experience, you have probably found that affection for a poem very frequently precedes the understanding of it.

Reading a poem for the first time you cannot really expect to be sure of what the meaning is. Whether the uncertainty lies with you or with the poet, or in what ratio the blame is to be apportioned, would vary from case to case. I must suppose that most poets, even if they do not make it their constant aim to say everything with the utmost clarity, do not go much out of their way on purpose to prevent understanding. It would be only the self-consciously experimental poet who would do this, and for that reason we may leave the experimental poet out of our study. For I like to think that all the best poets are capable of thinking, and thinking straight, and probably intend to do so most of the time, although they do not always manage to stick to the plan.

Of course some uncertainty can remain even after repeated readings, that is, if the poem has about it a certain amount of the complexity we like to think makes it worthwhile. But unless the poem has seized you in some powerful way you will not want to take the trouble of trying to worry out its

meaning later. The kinds of obscurity I am thinking about are common enough, and one kind in particular seems to occur with considerable frequency in the work of a certain type of poet. Hopkins, Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas: these would be the obvious examples. Even if the sense is never wholly grasped, poems that work like theirs may well go on exerting some inexplicable hold, if this is not too embarrassing an admission to make. I am trying to describe what actually happens when reading rather than what, according to one theory or another, ought more respectably to happen.

The singular power of such poems seems to penetrate the emotional system directly, without ever having to pass through the understanding; or at least the understanding, with its analytical tendencies, is temporarily suspended. The effect can be like a blow of sorts or a blast of wind. As I say, it is perfectly possible to go on admiring such poems without altogether understanding them. I would compare the experience to reading a piece of music at sight. I happen to be a good sight-reader, and I can usually manage to play through the average piece of piano music, not without mistakes of course, but about as well on the first try as after many run-throughs, for my technique is not very sound. Just so with a poem—repeated readings may never get rid of all the mistakes, but you can, from the outset, get a very good idea of the way it goes.

Nor is any commentary, any gloss, ever likely to answer all questions satisfactorily; it seems that the first uncertainty is going to remain as part of the overall effect. Psychologically, the uncertainty itself could probably be said to constitute at least a small part of what has managed to get communicated, just as it was a part of the original excitement. A sense that some meaning hides behind the curtain of language is almost enough to satisfy one provisionally, especially at an early stage of reading. It probably matters less than you would think just what the meaning proves to be in the long run, if you ever do get at it. But believing or guessing that a meaning

of some kind is there is important, I think, for all good readers. One of my contemporaries has been quoted as saying there are no hidden meanings in his poems, a remarkable confession. If this were true, there would then be no obscurities in his poems, and the result would most likely end up as trivial or frivolous. I do not mean to claim that the reverse would hold true; obscurity in itself can hardly guarantee importance and seriousness to a poem.

I am one of those who like poetry that is difficult, up to a point. It engages more of the whole man; I am bound to it by more ties of association. One is encouraged to go on trying to get beyond the difficulties by a kind of confidence the poem arouses, probably because it looks carefully put together; or it looks brilliant and flashy; or it reminds one of admired passages and thus through resemblance borrows some of the authority of previous work. I want to give the name of “benign obscurity” to this kind of difficulty, for there are plenty of other kinds which do not work this way but only leave one feeling rather lost and helpless. Notes help with poems of this class, despite the prejudice in some quarters against them, as if poetry could be the better for not being understood. There may even be a touch of truth in this attitude, for the mysterious admittedly has some pull to it, though in the end I think one is better off for being given the odd fact. Though sometimes felt to be, obscurity is not the path to the sublime; but then in fairness you must add that neither does it defeat the sublime.

I mentioned Hopkins earlier. Hopkins can be very difficult, protesting all the while that he aims at being “intelligible.” In his case, the very oddities of the surface are enough to make the poems look at least as obscure as they are; and anyhow oddness itself strikes me as a minor variant of obscurity. There are passages in Hopkins, many of them, that come at you first as a brilliant shower of words, attached presumptively to some plot or argument it is clearly going to take a good deal of labor to

work out, a labor that the beauty of the text teases you into postponing, perhaps indefinitely. We have, for the time being, hardly more than a rich heaping of almost pure language, and the truth is probably that we are not displeased by that. We may feel dazzled, overwhelmed, a bit dizzy, as from drinking too deeply. We may not want the dazzle to end up as the total message, but style can slide over into content and nudge it out of the way. Nor is this altogether a bad thing, at least temporarily. Poetry would be a dull and ordinary kind of expression if the possibility of the poet's being carried away did not sometimes hover over the text as one read.

Hopkins does go overboard, I think, in "Spelt from Sybil's Leaves" with extraordinary results. Almost before beginning to worry about the possibility of there being a meaning, one senses the great power of the poem; at least I did, when first encountering it in late adolescence, and some of that first charmed bewilderment still clings to the poem when I read it now.

Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable, | vaulty,
voluminous, . . . stupendous
Evening strains to be time's vást, | womb-
of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night.
Her fond yellow hornlight wound to the
west, | her wild hollow hoarlight hung to
the height
Waste; her earliest stars, earlstars, | stárs
principal, overbend us,
Fíre-féaturing héaven. For eárh | her béing
has unbóund; her dápplé is at énd, as-
Tray or aswarm, all throughther, in throngs; |
self ín self stéépèd and páshed—quíte
Disremembering, dísmémbering | áll now.
Heart, you round me right
With: Oúir évening is óver us; óur night |
whélms, whélms, ánd will énd us.
Only the beakleaved boughs dragonish |
damask the tool-smooth bleak
light; black,
Ever so black on it. Oúir tale, O óur oracle! |
Lét life, wáned, ah lét life wínd
Off hér once skéined stained véined varíety |
upon, áll on twó spools; párt, pen, páck

Now her áll in twó flocks, twó folds—bláck,
white; | ríght, wrong; réckon but, réck but,
mínd

But thése two; wáre of a wórld where bút
these | twó tell, éach off the óther; of a rack
Where, selfwring, selfstrung, sheathe- and
shelterless, | thóughts agáinst thóughts
ín groans grínd.

I have to believe that the first impression this poem makes must involve, as it did for me, being overwhelmed by the language of it prior to any determined attempt to get at the meaning—the language and, yes, the rhythm, which must strike anyone as not only different from the general run of poetic rhythm but quite singular and personal, vaguely Anglo-Saxon perhaps, but strangely outside of history. Still, the rhythm cannot be said to have very much to do with the plain sense of the poem, if this poem can even be said to have anything about it so ordinary as a plain sense.

What I am calling its language consists not only of a special diction, featuring a dialect word like *throughther*, a coinage like *attuneable*, and several typical Hopkins compounds, but a variety of sound effects, chiefly alliteration and a Welsh-like chiming, together with various twists of rhyme, all of which being piled together make for a very mannered kind of writing, just the sort you would instinctively turn away from if there were not in all this seeming chaos some feeling that it was not chaos after all; and not mere decoration and design either, though that is certainly a noticeable part of the working of these words, words that appear to have been rolled out of the word-box like so many dice.

The atmosphere, all gloom and doom, rises up out of the poem early in any reading of it, never to depart; and this seems to be enough to give you the idea that all the bits and pieces of language and rhythm you are hearing can be connected, if not so much to one another in any familiar or logical way, then perhaps by referring them all loosely back to some general mood-center. There is undeniably an emo-

tional as well as a verbal harmony to the whole. With the accumulation of detail, the evening—the atmosphere and mood associated with the evening—deepens, deepens seriously. One becomes aware in the last part of the poem that some type of judging is to take place; things are to be divided into good and bad, light and dark. You see that it is a kind of judgment day, perhaps the very day of judgment itself. Whether it is just a case of the day's gloom bringing on a state of depression or whether this is indeed meant to stand for the last day of all, the feeling could hardly be more oppressive and at the same time full of awe, thrilled and exalted, an odd complex of emotional reactions.

Whatever theology was in it for Hopkins, it is probably not necessary for a reader now to work up in any detail, although I would not deny that the more the reader can get to know the fuller his sense of the poem can become. I am saying just that you need not start at that end of it. It was doubtless a good thing for the author to know more than we do and for him to put as much as he could of what he knew into the poem. We are aware of the theology without, most of us, wishing to become converts, as one of Hopkins's editors is said to have done. No doubt the Jesuit reader who has the kind of feel for language and for rhythm I like to think I have would do better by the poem than I could hope to do; at the same time, a Jesuit reader, lacking this equipment, would not do as well as I suppose I might. This is to say that a good part not only of the value but of the very substance and life of the poem does not depend primarily on what passes for meaning.

The string of alliterations in the first line makes that point early, so that you know from the start what you are letting yourself in for. The choice of this run of adjectives is determined as much by sound, by the fact that they alliterate, as by their descriptive or doctrinal point. If there had been another halfway appropriate adjective alliterating on *v* (*past* must be saved for the following line), we might not have got the famous musical

rest between *voluminous* and *stupendous* in the second half of the line. Hopkins was obviously so much in love with all the jingle-jangle of poetry that I cannot see him choosing to rest the case on meaning alone. This is one poem in which (to use I. A. Richards's very useful old terms) the vehicle has wrestled with the tenor—and won.

I hope I shall not be classed as some sort of philistine for making this argument, but as Empson remarks, "one must judge how far a thing needs explaining"; and I am trying to avoid the kind of critical thinking that pretends to understand more than is there to be understood and that at the same time is unwilling to state the obvious, especially if it would seem in any way naïve to do so. The truth is that obscurity, in the actual transaction between writer and reader, is not altogether destructive, despite the hard line taken against it by responsible critics. We act on this principle every day in reading even if we are sometimes reluctant to acknowledge it. By obscurity I do not of course mean the blanketing fog that can creep over everything. It ought to be admitted, however, that one may be led on, and cheerfully enough at times, by precisely one's failure to grasp what is being said. And there is the excitement, meanwhile, of being in beyond one's depth.

A poem like Hopkins's sonnet could be glossed much more closely and narrowly than I have attempted to do. It is the kind of poem that tempts you to gloss it to death, for that matter. But I believe that what makes it so powerful is involved less with the specifics than with something broader, more general; there may be as much theology in it as there is human feeling, but what comes across is the human feeling.

And then of course a poem or a passage in a poem may still be obscure even after the critic has told you what it means. For one thing, the critic may be wrong about it or partly wrong. For another, it is likely that he has managed to dig out only by hard labor the sense that had lain darkly hidden. Some

part of the effect may always be a lingering memory of the very darkness in which it was hidden, or just the fact that at one time it had seemed to be hidden. Hart Crane, even more than Hopkins, gives you this impression over and over again—the very difficulty and the attendant puzzlement are an essential part of the whole package, and you do want the whole package.

So far, I have been concentrating on the highly charged deployment of language that leads to a shift of attention away from the plain meaning of the poem to the strong and sometimes strange sounds it makes; in other words, on poems dominated by vehicle rather than tenor. But poems that aim for a prosier statement may also be given to their own kinds of obscurity, quite apart from any of the gaudier tricks of language. Edwin Arlington Robinson from the start wanted to use a prosier language than his contemporaries were using, and even at its highest pitch his language is far calmer than the language of Hopkins or Crane. Because of the rather old-fashioned manner, his poems might be thought to go about their business with a kind of bluff, if ironic or rueful, straightforwardness. Yet any reader with more than a casual acquaintance with his work will have encountered poems of his totally resistant to analysis and, incidentally, none the better for it. There is a kind of Robinson poem, however, that stands somewhere in between, neither simply straightforward nor impenetrable. “Eros Turannos” is one of these, and some consider it the best thing he ever wrote.

She fears him, and will always ask
What fated her to choose him;
She meets in his engaging mask
All reasons to refuse him;
But what she meets and what she fears
Are less than are the downward years,
Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs
Of age, were she to lose him.

Between a blurred sagacity
That once had power to sound him,

And Love, that will not let him be
The Judas that she found him,
Her pride assuages her almost,
As if it were alone the cost. —
He sees that he will not be lost,
And waits, and looks around him.

A sense of ocean and old trees
Envelops and allures him;
Tradition, touching all he sees,
Beguiles and reassures him;
And all her doubts of what he says
Are dimmed by what she knows of days—
Till even prejudice delays
And fades, and she secures him.

The falling leaf inaugurates
The reign of her confusion;
The pounding wave reverberates
The dirge of her illusion;
And home, where passion lived and died,
Becomes a place where she can hide,
While all the town and harbor side
Vibrate with her seclusion.

We tell you, tapping on our brows,
The story as it should be,—
As if the story of a house
Were told, or ever could be;
We'll have no kindly veil between
Her visions and those we have seen,—
As if we guessed what hers have been,
Or what they are or would be.

Meanwhile we do no harm; for they
Who with a god have striven,
Not hearing much of what we say,
Take what the god has given;
Though like waves breaking it may be,
Or like a changed familiar tree,
Or like a stairway to the sea
Where down the blind are driven.

There are things about this poem we will never know, just as there are things about it we seem to have known even before we started reading it. For one of its first secrets is that it takes a classic story situation, one we think we understand because we recognize it. A woman of good standing in a

small town marries for love, but marries beneath her; the man betrays her in some fashion, probably sexual; and for reasons the townspeople think they can guess at, the wife, victim of the tyrannical god of love, sticks with the husband. In general shape and outline, the story, at least the circumstances of the situation, may remind you a little of Henry James's *Washington Square*, or even of the Faulkner short story, "A Rose for Emily," though the outcome is in both examples dramatically different. Robinson's story is far more restrained than Faulkner's, for instance, but also more ambiguous, more obscure; nor is it only because of the differences between prose and verse that this is so.

For that matter, "Eros Turannos" is one of those poems that show Robinson's interest in narrative writing (twenty years earlier he had tried unsuccessfully to write prose sketches), and almost everyone who comments on this poem calls it "novelistic." Such compression as it has comes off because the prose details are, practically speaking, left out; they have been transformed into generality, an abstract or summary; the language, instead of being heated-up and rich, seems barely adequate to contain the force of the bottled-up emotion of the poem, which keeps threatening to break out. One might argue over whether or not it does break out finally in the three particularized images with which the poem reaches its climax. But even in this Robinsonian equivalent of a purple passage the language does not have the high-key intensity of Hopkins or Crane, and we need not put this down to the time and place of the poem—New England, early this century—or even to the temperament of the author, but to a clear aesthetic choice.

Mildly Jamesian, the method involves a high degree of indirection in the telling of the tale, though with less willful withholding or postponing of vital information than in many Robinson poems. His "En Pasant," for example, is hopelessly lost to us because the information necessary to re-

construct the dramatic situation is refused us. Not so with "Eros Turannos": its obscurity is a good deal more subtle. It is tempting to feel that the moral complexity Robinson sees in the situation is responsible for the mild bewilderment we are left with, and I believe it is the method itself that allows one to think that. We learn, rather late in the poem, that the facts of the case—or what we must take to be the facts, since they are all we have—are being provided by the townspeople, a sort of civic chorus on the fringes of this small-town tragedy. It is their gossip we hear, and even they seem to have some doubts as to the reliability of their interpretation, as the next to last stanza attempts to explain.

So small a technical matter as the handling of the verb tenses contributes to the overall obscurity. In the last three stanzas, we can be sure that we are lodged in the present, but before that we can hardly help wondering whether Robinson is dealing with some stage of the courtship, or with the early days of the marriage, or even perhaps with the tragic present. The woman's fear of the loneliness of old age "were she to lose him"—does that come before their marriage or after? Is it a motive for marrying or a motive for staying married? As presented, it seems almost to be both; and that uncertainty, if it does rise to the level of consciousness, may serve the poem a little by adding to its sense of moral complexity, even though by way of a slight confusion.

This is fairly shaky ground, I realize, but such ambiguities are best when felt to be rooted in the emotional complications of situation or statement, as they are here. And, indeed, compared to the obscurities that now, at the end of the "modern" century, are accepted as standard practice, with little or no attempt to rationalize them, Robinson's are hardly worth making much of a fuss over. But to persist: when she "secures him"—does this not sound as if she has just "caught" him, as the spinster catches the elusive bachelor? Yet it comes midway through the poem and thus, if the poem had been developed in chronological

order, well along the time line of the action. But "secures" is as ambiguous as any word in the poem. It could mean also that she binds him to her with renewed force; or even that she provides him with the security of her house and goods, making him secure, as he apparently wishes to be. The meanings do not exactly conflict but, on first acquaintance with the rather bald and bleak style of the poem, the way they mingle and coexist comes as something of a surprise. Instead of the words adding richness and resonance to the scene, as in the Hopkins poem, the dramatic situation here seems to add a suggestiveness and depth to the unspectacular words of the poem. It is as if we caught glimpses of a moral complexity through the chinks in the logic of its expression.

If this is so, we can at least suggest that some of the obscurity is expressive of the very understanding the poem is intended to carry. It seems a reflection and by-product of Robinson's choice of the anonymous town gossips as tellers of the tale, since they can hardly be omniscient. (This is a familiar device in short stories, as in the Faulkner story already mentioned.) Some of the deepest truths of character and situation are bound to remain hidden and uncertain due to the method; or the method is chosen in order to keep these truths dark. As the poet Robert Mezey puts it, Robinson doesn't like to tell you anything he doesn't know for sure, and that includes practically everything.

But it would be wrong in any case to push too far in any search for final truths here. That the woman's seclusion points to madness, as has been suggested, strikes me as far-fetched, too much a novelistic cliché to have tempted Robinson; nor are we required to believe that she commits suicide (by drowning, presumably), though there is a fairly high suicide rate among Robinson's characters. The truth, whatever it may be, is held in suspension, unresolved: that itself is the resolution, the final truth. If the poem seems in the end somehow more definite than this as you look back upon it, put it

down to the eloquence of the last stanza and especially of the last three or four lines, which are bound to ring and echo in the memory as if no more could possibly have been said.

In neither the Robinson nor the Hopkins poem does the initial puzzlement or uncertainty entirely disappear; it seems instead to become embedded in one's experience of the poem and inextricable from it. To claim the uncertainty itself as part of the proper meaning would be to go too far, but it comes fairly near the truth, so near as to be worth being wrong about. In a poem like "Spelt from Sybil's Leaves" it is the language and the rhythm—aspects of the vehicle—that demand attention from the start, that never, for that matter, let go; what for convenience I have called the meaning depends on the language for its first life. In "Eros Turannos" the conditions are reversed. Here it is the meaning—which is to say the plot—that takes over; it is the tenor that dominates. The language probably needs to be capable of rising to a modestly excited level from time to time, as it does, but basically merely to be adequate will do.

There must be dozens of other types of obscurity, some driven by theory, some of course quite accidental, and whether any or all could seem as benign as the types we have been dealing with seems problematic. Both the Hopkins and the Robinson examples were strong enough by nature—by what without reference to the meters and the rhyming we ought to be willing to call form—to support a measure of obscurity without the integrity of the poem being seriously compromised. Indeed, in both poems the obscurity seems unavoidable; unless we could somehow see much more deeply into them, I do not believe we could ever say that the poems could have come into existence—could go on existing now—without it. And therefore the obscurity is no handicap, perhaps even has its uses—can we claim this much?

Letters

Knowledge—or ghettoization?

To the Editors:

I am troubled by the casualness of your reasoning in “Knowledge—or ghettoization?” (Notes & Comments, December 1996). Frankly, I sense that you have fallen prey to the same sort of “political agenda” that you attribute to Afro-American studies as a whole.

First, you must know that virtually all disciplines in the late-twentieth-century academy—including “real disciplines (history, English, anthropology, etc.)”—have grappled with doubts about “universalism, objectivity, and classical traditions.” If you’re serious about criticizing Asante and Afro-American studies, you should not insinuate that Asante and the critique of knowledge that represents itself as perspectiveless are linked together by some unique form of stupidity. Your argument here resembles the writing of Joel Chandler Harris and others, who would write “wuz” instead of “was” to represent Black people’s speech. Such misrepresentations illustrate why Afro-American studies departments are so necessary. Journalists are not the only influential people who write as you do.

Second, your enumeration of “real disciplines” does little to explain what makes them more “real” than Afro-American studies. Your unexamined assertion of “reality” is precisely what good scholarship, and good journalism, are meant to reexamine. Ask yourself a few questions, setting aside for the moment your own political agenda. What makes “English” a “real discipline”? Why, for example, isn’t it reducible

to linguistics? To your mind, are the hundreds of universities with departments, committees, and degree-granting programs on other particular languages, regions, and sets of cultures simply misguided? Are Latin-American studies, African studies, Slavic languages and literatures, American studies, Celtic languages and literatures, East Asian studies, Near Eastern languages and civilizations, and classics “pseudo-subjects”? What “real disciplines” would you reduce them to without impoverishing the knowledge that they generate? If you want to be fair, you might call all of them, including Afro-American studies, “pseudo subjects.” It would be equally fair to call them all “interdisciplinary,” which is usually an encomium in today’s academy. But I suspect that your choice of terms is both well-informed and intentional. Or perhaps you just didn’t realize how selective your criticism sounds.

Departments and degrees in area studies have a long precedent, as do disciplines with strongly political motivations. Classics, for example long served the purpose of (1) defining—or proposing—Europe’s shared cultural roots and (2) asserting their superiority to local European and to non-European cultural traditions. I need not detail the highly political, and murderous, uses to which biology has been put. To my mind, such facts do not mean that classics and biology are “pseudo-subjects” with no place in the curriculum. Rather, such facts mean that those subjects have stood to benefit from better research and from challenges (sometimes inter-disciplinary) to the political motives that have shaped them. Indeed, both subjects have benefited

greatly from such challenge and reconsideration, as has Afro-American studies. For example, women's studies has compelled us to reconsider idealistic fables about Greek democracy. What more can one ask of a scholarly tradition?

Well, one could ask that it not be ghettoized. And, mind you, the greatest victims and perpetrators of ghettoization have been the disciplines that you call "real." Disciplinary specialization and culturally homogeneous faculties can generate great scholarship, but all disciplines are also vastly enriched by conversations across disciplines, across cultures, and across sub-cultures. That new departments and committees have arisen to support the systematic, inter-disciplinary study of women and of the African diaspora—tasks long neglected and often prejudicially handled in the academy—is nothing but a boon for the intellectual community. New experiences and critical perspectives have been introduced into the pursuit of truth, enhancing rather than diminishing the existing scholarship. I see these developments not as a ghettoization but as a *de*-ghettoization of the academy.

Harvard's is not the first or the only Afro-American studies department seeking to de-ghettoize the academy. We are one further group of scholars determined to do so with attention to diverse perspectives and with fidelity to the truth. Trained in English, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, religion, economics, and jurisprudence, Harvard's team in Afro-American studies is seeking to guarantee that the best of scholarship in our area of study be used to enhance our respective disciplines, and that the best in our disciplines be used to benefit Afro-American studies. Contrary to the apparent intent of your quotation of Douglas [*sic*] and Baldwin, Afro-American studies comes with no monolithic axioms about where the home of African-Americans lies or about the biological distinctness of "Negroes and whites." What we share is a commitment to examine more closely and deeply the experience of the African diaspora.

J. Lorand Matory

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The Editors reply:

We would be the last to charge that the attitudes exhibited by Molefi Kete Asante in *The Afro-centric Idea* represent "some unique form of stupidity." Alas, far from being unique, they are as widespread as unexamined clichés can be. That is the problem. Were Asante's ideas unique or even rare, they would not much matter. As it is, they describe one of the central academic prejudices of the age: namely, the contention that truth is ultimately a coefficient of power. At least since Plato's Thrasymachus, this has been a favored gambit of intellectual nihilists. It is a position that requires straw men, and Professor Matory has conjured up one of the most popular in the idea of "knowledge that represents itself as perspectiveless." If he were himself a little less casual about such matters, the Hugh K. Foster Associate Professor might grasp the basic distinction between a defense of objectivity—an epistemological ideal without which the idea of truth is incoherent—and a super-Cartesian fantasy of perspectiveless insight. Every sane person outside the academy will endorse the former. We know of no one who subscribes to the latter except as a metaphor for divine knowledge.

About Professor Matory's second point, or series of points. The difference between English and Afro-American studies as academic subjects is this: English comprises a body of knowledge that transcends the political filiations of those who study it; Afro-American studies is defined by those political filiations. This is why we compared Afro-American studies to women's studies. Both were invented in response to certain political grievances; they continue to exist solely to cater to those grievances. It is in this sense that Afro-American studies, like women's studies, is a pseudo-subject. The primary *raison d'être* of both is not intellectual but political: they exist not to foster knowledge but to encourage a sense of solidarity and enhance dubious feelings of self-esteem. In the course of things, both will naturally poach upon real disciplines—history, anthropology, literature, etc.—for their material; indeed, experience shows that they will aggressively ape legitimate disciplines in a search for academic respectability. Whatever else might be said about the Afro-American studies establishment at Harvard, it certainly represents a daz-

zingly successful act of intellectual impersonation by Professor Gates and his accomplices.

What Professor Matory says about classics brings us to the nub of the matter. The *purpose* of the classics was never to define Europe's shared cultural roots or to assert the superiority of the European tradition; studying the classics might indeed have had that *effect* in certain circumstances; but the purpose of studying the classics is now what it always has been, to gain insight into languages and cultures not our own. Professor Matory's apparent blindness to this and other basic distinctions—what he says about biology is even more embarrassing—illustrates one way in which pseudo-subjects like Afro-American studies perpetuate the very ghettoization they were meant to overcome.

Machiavelli's virtue

To the Editors:

As a moral and political ally of Hadley Arkes, I rarely disagree with him. But I would not want Mr. Arkes' fine books reviewed with the lack of scholarship and scruple Mr. Arkes displayed in his review of Harvey C. Mansfield's *Machiavelli's Virtue* (September 1996).

Mr. Arkes sought to attribute to Mansfield a Machiavellian view of the relation between law and executive power. This Machiavellian view would not only sanction criminal and unconstitutional conduct by American presidents, in retrospect. In prospect it relishes, and would incite, spectacularly unlawful executive actions. In his review, Mr. Arkes makes a highly imaginative effort to tell the reader what Mansfield *would* think about American law *if* he agreed with Machiavelli. That is wholly fanciful because Mansfield has written at great length to the contrary in books that Mr. Arkes ought to have been reading.

Mr. Arkes is evidently ignorant that Mansfield devoted an entire book to this topic. In *Taming the Prince: The Ambivalence of Modern Executive Power* (1989), Mansfield showed how the Machiavellian view was adopted by Locke as executive prerogative; but deliberately rejected by the Framers of the American Constitution and by the authors of *The Federalist*, with Mansfield's

approval. *Taming the Prince* is a defense of Aristotelian natural right as the unrefuted permanent alternative to the Machiavellian executive. Since Mr. Arkes shares Mansfield's intention to guide men of the highest virtue toward the office of the presidency (and virtue toward constitutional offices generally), I look forward to his response to Mansfield's finding that "Aristotle's kingship of virtue remains in the Constitution."

Robert Eden
Hillsdale College

Hadley Arkes replies:

I was puzzled by this letter, to put it mildly. I know Robert Eden to be a careful, close reader, and it would always be a matter of interest to me if my own reading, on any matter of consequence, diverged from his own. But in this case, I must wonder whether he has not misread my own piece. His language, in any event, betrays a distemper that runs beyond his sedate, better judgment. Let us return to my review.

Part of Harvey Mansfield's genius in *Taming the Prince*, and in the most recent book, is that he tries to make the most compelling case for Machiavelli's teaching—not only to show its shrewdness, but to show in a chilling way that Machiavelli might have gotten it right: Machiavelli may in fact give an accurate account of the way things have to be in politics, and he gives an account of the way things are, even under our Constitution, especially after we have begun to absorb his moral premises. And so, the Constitution may indeed become but a paper parchment: Government will find its characteristic expression in *esecuzioni*, where the executive power lays hands on people. And with a political leadership determined to get its way, the Constitution will offer no impediment.

Now, through all of this I never attributed to Professor Mansfield an agreement with Machiavelli's premises, or his view of the ends of political life. It seemed to me that Mansfield was simply trying to get in Machiavelli's skin, or as we used to say, to understand Machiavelli as he understood himself. In order to do that, he had to desist from moralizing, or from the kind of quibbling that would distract the reader and undercut the argument he was trying to build.

I wrote my review with that sense of the matter, and so when I came to the end—and came then to the fact that Mansfield had left Machiavelli's argument unrefuted, or unchallenged at the foundation—I did not conclude that Mansfield had absorbed that argument as his own. I simply said that he left us with dark intimations as he left Machiavelli's argument unchallenged—or indeed, as he gave us intimations, on the other side, that the case for natural law did not provide a plausible counter to the challenge posed by Machiavelli.

As it turns out, I've taught *Taming the Prince* in two seminars, as I've taught from other pieces written by Harvey Mansfield. As someone attentive to that book, I thought that Mr. Eden would have noticed that the writing in the review was affected, at several points, by the argument in *Taming the Prince*. It is curious that the last line in Eden's letter, cast up as a reproach to me, mentions Mansfield's remark that "Aristotle's kingship of virtue remains in the Constitution." That line has a further resonance in *Taming the Prince*: "Just how radical Machiavelli's understanding is becomes evident in his new understanding of nature, one that overturns natural law and natural right in the Aristotelian tradition." The line that Mr. Eden cites from *Machiavelli's Virtue* would have a decisive significance only if the Constitution, and the teaching of natural right, had not been superseded, or refuted, by Machiavelli.

As for myself, I think it has not been refuted, and as Mr. Eden no doubt knows, I continue to belong to the party that does in fact think that the Constitution, and the American republic, must be understood in the classic tradition running back to Aristotle. But as Eden must also know, that is exactly what has been at issue in a recent argument that has embroiled Mansfield and others among our friends. In that encounter, the case was sounded again for natural rights, and for the foundations of those rights in necessary, moral truths. In this controversy, Mansfield was accused of emitting rather ambiguous signals of late, or backing away from that tradition of natural rights. One of those signals might in fact be Mansfield's line, quoted in my review, that Machiavelli had prepared the ground for modernity by "refuting classical natural right."

Now, I have not been willing myself to pounce so quickly, or to fly so readily to the inference that Harvey Mansfield is throwing over the tradition of classic natural right. I was willing to indulge the assumption, rather, that Mansfield has not worked everything out; that there was just so much he could encompass in one book; and we should hear what he has to say more fully on these issues before we leap to emphatic conclusions. But by the same token, I was not willing to put words in his mouth, and I'm afraid that Mr. Eden is attributing to Mansfield more than he was willing, precisely, to say in this book. In crystallizing Machiavelli's argument, he had the chance to lead readers to the critical point where Machiavelli's argument could be challenged at the root. He had an ample chance to suggest the grounds of that serious challenge. Again, that might have been more freight than he wished to lay upon this book, and yet his reticence on these points could not have been inadvertent. To repeat, I share Eden's views on Aristotle and the Constitution, but it would involve a willful misreading to say that Mansfield, in this book, takes that side decisively or seeks to vindicate that understanding against the challenge posed by Machiavelli. It seems to me then utterly unwarranted for Eden to blast me for failing to attribute to Mansfield an understanding he left notably muted and undefended.

Again, I took his reticences for what they were, and I did not impute to Mansfield any treasons, any turning away from the teachings that connected him to his friends. From the many kind calls and letters that have come in, I gather that my readers have understood my piece, in tone and substance, as I had intended it. They read the piece, that is, as an admiring review of the book, by one who sought to convey the force of its teaching—but then sought to make his concerns, or criticisms, delicate. In any case, it should be clear that I never said anything about Mansfield as unmeasured, and as harsh, as what Robert Eden thought fit to say about me. In temper and substance, his response seems to me quite out of scale with the essay that inspired it. These issues are never out of season, but this manner of taking them up marks a loss of proportion and a flight from judgment.

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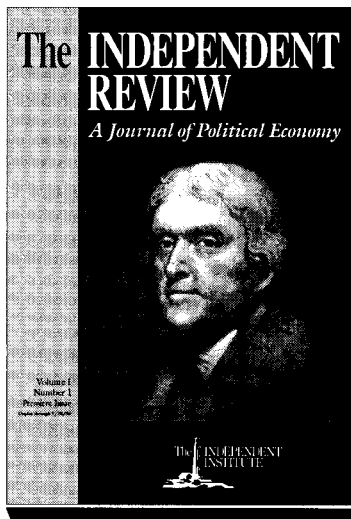
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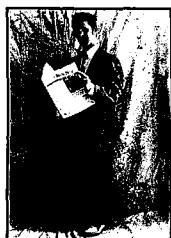
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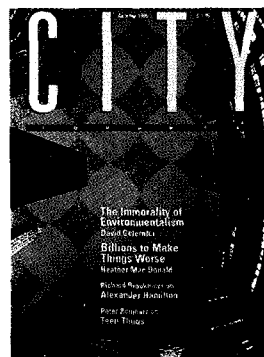
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